

Not Normal

The British author Malcolm Muggeridge was once interviewed on American television in the early 1960s, admitting that he had only once in his life voted in an election. “On that occasion,” as he told it, “I just had to. There was this one candidate who had been committed to an asylum and upon discharge was issued a certificate of sanity. Well, now, how could I resist? What other politician anywhere has an actual medical report that he is sane?”

There is something discomfiting about a man who feels compelled to produce evidence proving he is normal. In trying to allay concerns about his mental health, he ends up deepening them. Yet what is true for a single politician is no less true for a political movement presuming to express the aspirations of a nation. The desire to integrate successfully with the other, presumably “normal” nations points to a fundamental insecurity, one that runs directly against the grain of most national ideals, which traditionally aim at fostering a sense of pride and distinctiveness of spirit.

For the longest time, however, the wish to become a “normal” people has been one of the major rallying cries in modern Jewish nationalism. Prominent figures in the pre-state Zionist movement called upon the Jews, a people persecuted, alienated, and scattered throughout the world, to remake themselves as a nation “like all the nations,” one that could live a modest, proper life in a sovereign state. This dream took various forms,

depending upon one's ideological tastes: Some, such as Leon Pinsker and Max Nordau, viewed it through liberal, bourgeois eyes; while others, such as Ber Borochov and Haim Arlosoroff, phrased it in Marxist or socialist terms. In either case, the assumption was that the primary aim of the Zionist revolution was to elevate the standing of the Jewish people until it reached equal footing with other peoples that were materially secure and healthy in spirit.

With hindsight, it is not difficult to see that this version of Zionism took a page from the ideal of emancipation, which sought to remake individual Jews as equal and active partners in Western civilization. This ideal, which captured the imagination of Jewish *maskilim* from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, was dashed against the harsh anti-Semitic reality in Europe and Russia, and finally abandoned with the destruction of the European diaspora in the Holocaust. Yet it found longer life within the rubric of Zionism, and its echoes can be heard in the hopes of some of that movement's thinkers to find in nationalism the elixir which might correct the anomaly of Jewish life in exile. As Pinsker wrote in his path-breaking essay *Auto-Emancipation*:

The great ideas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have not passed by our people without leaving a mark. We feel not only as Jews; we feel as men. As men, we, too, wish to live like other men and be a nation like the others....

Similar opinions were embraced by many Jews, particularly those who saw themselves as having awoken from the emancipatory dream, who chose to build their Zionism on the foundation of a broader, cosmopolitan sentiment. The movement's principal aim, they felt, should be to secure for the Jews, by reclaiming the material basis of communal life in their own land, the same emancipation as a people that they were unable to attain as individuals—in other words, to gain entry into the exclusive club of progressive, enlightened, “normal” nations.

Given the orientation of these Zionists, it should come as no surprise that many of them also sought to erase from the public consciousness those elements of Judaism which, in their eyes, stood in the way of Israel's acceptance among the nations—and in particular the idea of being a “chosen people.” Joseph Haim Brenner, one of the outstanding literary figures of the Second Aliya, gave voice to this sentiment when he wrote:

I would, with the most delicious and fierce pleasure, erase from the Hebrew prayer book of our generation any mention of “You have chosen us from among the nations.” I would do it today: Scratch clean all those counterfeit nationalist verses, until no trace would remain. Because this empty national pride, this groundless Jewish preening, will not repair the breach, nor will the aphorisms of a counterfeit nationalism amount to anything.

It cannot be denied, then, that the normalizing tendency within Zionism has been a part of the movement more or less from the beginning. Yet it is a distortion of history to argue, as have some of Pinsker's and Brenner's radicalized ideological descendants of late, that these views reflected the mainstream of classic Zionist thought. Indeed, they stood in deliberate opposition to the dominant approach, which saw the Jewish national movement as motivated by dreams that went far beyond “normalization,” building instead on the classical belief in the Jews' special mission among the nations.

Foremost among these was, of course, *Ahad Ha'am*. A leading figure in the early Zionist movement, he spelled out the implications of these two approaches with remarkable foresight. In his view, the greatest question facing the Zionist leadership was

whether the Jews are to live in their own state, according to their unique spirit, and to revive and develop the national possessions which they have

inherited from the past—or whether the state will merely be a European colony in Asia, one whose eyes and heart look toward the “metropolis” and try to imitate in all its endeavors the program which emerges from there.

The belief that the Zionist enterprise must in some way embody the unique spirit of the Jewish people was seen as central by the movement’s most important political and ideological leaders—including Theodor Herzl, David Ben-Gurion, A.D. Gordon, and Berl Katznelson. Herzl, himself a former devotee of emancipation, came to believe in the idea of a Jewish state as the only way to realize the special potential inherent in the Jewish nation. “By means of our state,” he wrote in his diary in 1895, “we can educate our people for tasks which still lie beyond our horizon. For God would not have preserved our people for so long if we did not have another destiny in the history of mankind.” To allow this to happen, Herzl believed that the Jews themselves would have to find their unique “inner unity” through a return to their own wellsprings. As he wrote in 1896: “A generation which has grown apart from Judaism does not have this [inner] unity. It can neither rely upon our past nor look to our future. That is why we shall once more retreat into Judaism and never again permit ourselves to be thrown out of this fortress.... We shall thereby regain our lost inner wholeness and along with it a little character—our own character. Not a Marrano-like, borrowed, untruthful character, but our own.”

A similar belief in the special mission of the Jewish nation was a central feature of Labor Zionism. A.D. Gordon, the spiritual mentor of many of the early kibbutzim and moshavim, made this idea central to his worldview. In an essay he wrote in 1920, Gordon called upon the Jews to rediscover the “cosmic element” in their national identity, something which was already beginning to find expression in the Palestine of his day:

Here something is beginning to flower which has greater human significance and far wider ramifications than our history-makers envisage....

We seek the rebirth of our national self, the manifestation of our loftiest spirit, and for that we must give our all.

As the Labor movement grew and developed, gradually coming to dominate the Zionist enterprise, many of its leaders adopted a similar approach. “We will not change the world’s attitude toward us by buying it off—not through any kind of ideological or spiritual bribery...,” declared Berl Katznelson, the leading ideologue of the Labor movement, in 1942. “Only if we have the strength to stand up for ourselves, to defend our righteousness, only if we ourselves live to the fullest the special phenomenon known as the Jewish destiny on earth... only then will we know how to bring our message to others.”

This was the vision which also inspired Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. In a lecture he delivered in 1950 to the high command of the IDF, under the title “Uniqueness and Destiny,” he argued that:

Our spiritual advantage has supported the Jewish people in every generation for four thousand years now, and only if the Israeli nation... continues to preserve our spiritual, moral, and intellectual advantage, which was the secret of our survival over thousands of years, we... will win from among the enlightened world friends and partners in the vision of the eternal redemption of humanity, a vision which beat in our hearts through all time, and which was revealed in the Book of Books that served as a light unto nations.

The years that have passed since the establishment of the State of Israel have not been kind to these hopes. The idealism once integral to mainstream Zionism has faded in the harsh light of Israel’s political, social, and strategic predicaments, and the dreams of a model Jewish civilization in the land of Israel have given way, in the eyes of many, to the more “realistic” goal of normalization. The deep rifts that have emerged in Israeli society have led many Israelis to doubt the idea of a unified “chosen people,” which

has come to be seen as reflecting a kind of religious fundamentalism or nationalist chauvinism. An outstanding expression of this sentiment appears in an essay written by one of Israel's premier literary figures, A.B. Yehoshua, entitled "In Defense of Normalcy":

The Bible, the prayers, whole sections of our tradition and our culture are flooded with the premise of "chosenness." No amount of humanist education can blur this premise, neither through treatises nor casuistry. We must begin to address this fundamental concept and, gradually, to uproot it. We are not the first people which has attempted to uproot its fundamental concepts.

In a similar spirit, the historian Yigal Eilam, whose recent book announces the *End of Judaism*, has assailed "the delusionary idea" of the chosen people, "the source of our tragedy," which has "brought upon us all the holocausts that we have known throughout Jewish history." (Yona Hadari, *Doing Some Thinking*, p. 420) Tel Aviv University historian Yehuda Elkana has written that the time has come for Israelis to "understand that our self-perception as the chosen people..., which allowed us to survive two thousand years of exile, now risks ruining our chances of establishing a normal society in a normal state." (*Ha'aretz*, March 18, 1996)

These views are not limited to the cultural elite. A segment of the Israeli public has begun to express its weariness in the face of the responsibilities which the "old" Zionist sense of chosenness demanded. The belief that Zionism has fulfilled its historic role—the establishment of a Jewish state—has spread, bringing in its wake a yearning for normalcy that seems to many to be the next, natural step in the country's "maturation." The journalist Tom Segev, who has depicted this transformation in his recent book *The New Zionists*, describes the emergence of a belief, gaining in popularity, according to which "Zionism had fulfilled its role, in a clearly successful way, and Israel is now moving on to the next phase." Uri Ram, a sociologist at Ben-Gurion University, writing in the special issue of the prestigious journal *Theory and Criticism* that marked Israel's fiftieth Independence

Day, describes this in terms of a new youth culture, centered in the cafes of Tel Aviv. “The Tel Aviv post-Zionists of the nineties no longer read the Passover Hagada,” he writes. “They engage in a willful act of forgetting, at their own initiative.... Not a prefabricated ‘Jewish bookshelf’ that is on sale now for all takers, nor a ‘rock of our existence’ strewn with battered bodies. They prefer plastic chairs and vodka with lemonade.”

Such sentiments are regrettable. The idea of becoming a “normal” nation, so appealing to those whose vision does not extend beyond seeing Israel transformed into an ordinary Western country, is not only alien to the diverse strands of Jewish tradition; it is antithetical to them. The sense of destiny, the belief that our people is slated for a particular calling, to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” has been the cornerstone of Jewish identity in all its forms, from the time of the Bible to the modern era. Through centuries of dispersion in all its lands, the Jewish people continued to regard themselves as a people with a special charge in the world—a calling that was spelled out by the prophet Isaiah:

I the Eternal, in my grace, have summoned you,
And I have grasped you by the hand.
I created you, and appointed you
A covenant-people, a light unto nations.
To open eyes deprived of light,
To rescue prisoners from confinement,
From the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:6-7)

To be sure, such a presumption often triggered resentment among other peoples and cultures. (“To this day,” proclaims the talmudic sage R. Avin in Exodus Raba, not without a measure of pride, “throughout the world Israel is called the ‘stiff-necked nation.’”) Yet it is difficult to imagine the Jews surviving pogroms and persecutions without the strength they are able to draw from belief in their unique mission. “Incommensurable as it is to human reason and imagining, unbearable as it must always be to recollection,” the philosopher George Steiner has written, “Auschwitz is

ephemeral as compared with the Covenant, with God's reinsurance of his hunted people. Hitler could no more prevail than could Nebuchadnezzar or the Inquisition. There were rabbis who exultantly proclaimed this axiom on the edge of the fire-pits."

The belief in a distinctive Jewish mission in the world was no less central to modern understandings of Judaism. Some thinkers, such as Franz Rosenzweig, Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Judah Magnes, understood that mission to be above all universal and moral in nature, something that in their minds did not fit well with the political aims of modern Jewish nationalism. Others, including the leading Zionist thinkers, understood sovereignty to be an essential means for the realization of the specific Jewish character, a greenhouse in which the Jewish people could develop their spiritual and moral qualities under conditions of freedom. For all the differences between these two approaches, they both based their grandest visions on a belief in Jewish chosenness, vigorously opposing its displacement by a goal of "normalization" for the Jews or Judaism.

Thus the idea of the Jews as a special, unique, "chosen" nation cannot be erased from Judaism. One cannot "uproot this fundamental concept," as Yehoshua would have us do, without gutting Judaism of its essential contents. Nor can it be surgically removed from the Jewish historical experience without denying that experience the very source of its vitality.

From an external viewpoint as well, one that looks at nations generally, the desire for normalcy seems odd and even self-defeating. As demonstrated by Anthony Smith, a sociologist at the London School of Economics, in his 1991 study *National Identity*, the idea of national "chosenness" is not unique to the Jews. On the contrary: Without a collective sense of destiny that causes a people to feel elevated above its neighbors, one could not imagine the emergence of the British, French, German, Irish, Polish, Russian, or Greek national identities. (With appropriate adjustments, Smith's list could easily include the United States as well, whose founders explicitly compared themselves to the chosen people of the Bible and whose policies in many areas are still animated by this sentiment.) While a belief in their

distinctiveness helped these nations survive and develop, those peoples who lacked such a belief—Smith cites the Phoenicians and Philistines as examples—tended to be absorbed within other civilizations following the loss of their independence. Without a sense of uniqueness or mission, these nations had little way of withstanding the pressures of assimilation over time, and many of them exist today only as archeological remains.

One may doubt whether the rejection of Jewish uniqueness has brought Israel any closer to “normalcy.” Stripped of its Jewish idealism, the country would still be a strategic, cultural, ethnic, and religious oddity—as the tragic events of the past year have made all too clear. But for anyone who holds the idea of a unique Jewish state dear, the present state of affairs is nothing short of alarming. What is needed is to re-educate the Jewish public about the critical role that a sense of national mission plays in the survival and prosperity of nations. It is unfortunate that many Jews today reflexively associate such ideas with messianism and racism, and bristle against any attempt to pass them on to the next generation. But this is no reason to abandon what has traditionally been a central pillar of both Jewish identity and Zionist ideology: The idea of the chosenness of Israel.

This is no credo of racial supremacy, nor does it deny the merits of other peoples or individuals. After all, the same Bible that introduced the idea of a chosen people also bequeathed to the world the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God. The Jewish people is above all a spiritual community, whose founding covenant may be joined by all the nations, if they so choose. This community has always accepted upon itself a sense of mission, demanding that its members rise above the mediocre and the “normal,” and instead strive constantly for intellectual and moral excellence. It seeks to overcome, at great cost, man’s lower inclinations, and to cultivate his loftiest, worthiest side.

Perhaps it is true that the Zionist dream of a sovereign Jewish people fulfilling its highest destiny in its own state is still a long way from

realization. For all its successes (and there are many), the State of Israel is not yet a model country. In some areas, its performance falls below even that of “normal” countries. At the same time, however, there would be nothing worse for the Jewish state than to relinquish its ancient dream of spiritual and moral elevation, of the realization of its national destiny—or, to put it more modestly, of an ethos of excellence and a clear sense of moral purpose. These are dreams that must never be given up. They are the lifeblood of the Zionist enterprise, and of Judaism as a whole.

Assaf Sagiv, for the Editors

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