

## **BE-TIPUL [IN TREATMENT]: ISRAEL AT SIXTY**

Israel was created not only as a state but also as a trope of self-sacrifice, solidarity, and redemption lifting up a bruised and battered people to become a model for the entire world. In its six decades, Israel, with its limited natural resources, has created a robust economy that takes full advantage of the global market and generates unprecedented growth. Technological changes have been rapidly integrated to provide its citizens with the most modern of infrastructures and access to the most sophisticated means of communication. Having paid dearly for their independence and been shadowed ever since by threats and attacks, Israelis have understandably channeled considerable capital and initiative into their military to produce one of the most proficient armies in the world. But the language that guided the country through shortages, rationing, and the constant dread of the dangers on its borders cannot quite accept the achievements so inequitably dispensed or admit into the public discourse the psychological costs in building the Jewish state.

In the past, Israel was filled more with the voices of its leaders than of its people, whose feelings were shrouded in what was interpreted as a self-imposed silence. That silence, however, was actually the outcome of a heavily regulated dominant culture determined to organize the view of what was happening in the country. Perhaps because Israelis were afraid they lacked the emotional resources to withstand the suffering, they agreed to deny public expression to their feelings. When despair about life in Israel did surface, it was typically shut down by recalling the heroic Zionist past. Emotional restraint thus became both a value and a sign of the commitment to national purpose. But now that the country's capacity can satisfy the personal ambitions of a significant number

of its citizens, the stoic survival that once held Israelis back from expressing their feelings seems a quaint but unnecessary relic that has so outlived its time, it can be easily discarded without any negative repercussions.

While the wounds of war were always acknowledged in literature, the darker dimensions of Israel's strategic predicament did not compel the same attention in the political arena nor alter a decorum that forged a solidarity requiring no explanation. But that silence did not hold. In recent years, an ethos of self-restraint has given way to a discourse obsessed with how people feel about events, policies, army service, themselves—all dissected in every conceivable way in the media. Not surprisingly, America's new television hit "In Treatment," about the experience of psycho-therapy is an Israeli transplant. With their emotions under constant surveillance, Israelis find it increasingly difficult to wrest meaning from the institutions and activities once celebrated as fulfilling the purpose of the Jewish state. Massive introspection may have shifted the priority once accorded to duty over personal interest, but it has also changed the cultural temper. Silence was taken as synonymous with confidence in Zionism's fundamental assumptions about history and the security a Jewish state could provide for the Jewish people. Full disclosure of the trials and tribulations of living with Jewish sovereignty could not help but loosen the grip of the Zionist truths once so deeply planted in Israel's culture.

At its origins, Israel managed the burden of the Jewish past by projecting a unified story that was supposed to serve as the basis of its imagined future. Israel has many battlegrounds that might have been turned into sites of mourning; instead, they became places of memory and for glorifying and memorializing the fallen as exemplary

figures who supposedly exhibited neither fear nor hesitation about the circumstances thrust upon them. Today, newly opened archives make Israel's past less a story of people propelled simply by the overarching idea of perfection than by the goal of self-interest, and the traditional narrative of Israel's history is presented as one among many competing points of view. Without the imperatives of the Zionist past, the future becomes less easily imaginable and the present more open to question.

Not so long ago, Zionism posited its own ascendancy in expectation of supplanting a Jewish religious belief and practice it deemed moribund and doomed to eventual extinction. Today, Zionism has been refitted and redefined by Jewish theology claiming the firm authority of national idealism and religious obedience and given impetus by its 1967 War. Once sanctity resided in Zionist projects; today, holiness seems rooted in ancient historic sites.

The Zionist project was also once cast as a powerful antidote to the condition of exile. In exile, Zionists described Jews as weak in body and mind in contrast to the strong, healthy, and beautiful Hebrews. Powerless in the face of hatred and discrimination and presumably closed off from options for self-fulfillment, Diaspora Jews were expected to assimilate where possible, loosen their bonds with religious belief, and consciously or not, impoverish Jewish culture and identity. Today, the interactions between Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora communities are crucial to sustaining an array of creative developments in literature, religious practice, and economic ventures in both domains. A significant number of Diaspora Jews is drawn into an engagement with Israel. For many Jews, including those who live in Israel, the very polarity between Diaspora and Homeland is anachronistic.

Political dislocations have deepened the sense of uncertainty in Israel. Israel once had a stable set of political institutions. Political parties achieved dominance without winning a majority of the votes in any election. Authority within the dominant political party often substituted for the coherent rule of state institutions. But over time authoritative institutions have been nibbled away by social and economic changes beyond their power to control.

Finally, Israel's sixty year history is also the story of the end of its consensus on security and on the value of military action. How that consensus was shaken by the outcome of particular wars and battles is well-known, but less understood is the fact that its demise has effected a remarkable dispersion of the once unimpeachable authority of the military. Soldiers now speak freely about their experiences in military actions—even in training exercises—and particularly about their feelings when wars are simply paused and never concluded.

The loss of confidence does not mean that Israelis are unwilling to rally to their country's defense in times of crisis. But Israelis are acutely aware that what they see as a matter of life and death is often viewed differently and condemned across the globe. Thus while most Israelis feel perfectly comfortable—even happy—with their homes and homeland, they are made constantly aware that their society has failed to live up to its early utopian dreams. Israel, in other words, has achieved normalcy but hasn't quite figured out how to cope with it.

Donna Robinson Divine  
Morningstar Family Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Government  
Smith College