

Zionist Dream or Zionist Nightmare: This Israeli Moment

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The top speed of an electric scooter is approximately 14.8 miles per hour. How do I know this random fact, you are no doubt wondering? Because I tested the limit of a certain “Bird” scooter on a Saturday night in Tel Aviv a few months ago. You’ve probably seen these scooters around DC, where you can rent them with a flash of your mobile phone camera over a QR code and unlock them for your local travels. They are not only all over DC, they’re all over the world. And I had been eyeing the one particular scooter parked across from my hotel on Hayarkon Street all day long. Every Saturday night for months, there has been a massive demonstration in the heart of Tel Aviv. Streets are closed for several blocks, and tens of thousands of Israelis have standing Saturday night plans to converge on the city center, flags and placards in hand at these monumental protests for what they believe is an effort to preserve the soul of Israeli democracy. I had been following the protests since the beginning and watched how they galvanized and grew exponentially, by the way, not only in Tel Aviv, which is by far the largest, but also in every major city in Israel. I had also been reading about how these protests represented an existential moment for the Jewish state. That these persistent, unwavering public assemblies had uncorked something in Israeli society. A showdown of values, philosophies, core principles as the nation is marking its 75th year of independence. Precisely because I am a committed Zionist; because I believe that it is nothing short of a miracle that there is an independent Jewish state in this world for the first time in 2,000 years; and because I believe that the wellbeing of the Jewish people everywhere is very much intertwined with the wellbeing of the State of Israel, I wanted to experience the protests for myself.

So I watched...*I watched that scooter*. I saw it parked there on Shabbat morning when I walked past it on my way to shul. I stuck out my neck farther than I am normally comfortable doing from the balcony of the 15th floor of the Crowne Plaza hotel, because if turned my head ever so much around the side of the building, the sidewalk—and that scooter—were visible. And as soon as Shabbat ended, I made a b-line across that busy thoroughfare, the Bird app already opened on my phone and ready to scan so I could get to that demonstration in time. I coasted south along the sea, then turned east, toward the city center. I dodged pedestrians, maneuvered around cars, avoided stray cats as I sped, at 14.8 mph toward the intersection of Begin and Kaplan streets. Before I got there, though, I encountered increasingly dense numbers of marchers. I actually had to ditch the scooter because it was impossible to scoot safely among so many people. What I saw that night, and the following Saturday night in front of President Isaac Herzog’s residence in Jerusalem was a gathering of secular Jews and religious Jews, combat veterans and retired IDF officers, college professors and Jews with tattoos, people wearing kippot, and many more with bare heads. I saw children hoisted on their parents’ shoulders and zigzagging through the crowds in strollers. I saw homemade signs and professionally produced placards. And then there were the T-shirts. So many t-shirts made especially for these gatherings with messages as harmonious as “People for the Declaration of Independence” to “Democracy or Rebellion,” with a raised, clenched fist for additional affect. Politicians, entertainers, and media personalities came to the stage to whip up the crowd, and there were loud, raucous chants “*De-mo-krat-ia*,” Democracy, that interrupted them after almost every sentence. I wanted to take it all in. To experience it first-hand. To listen, and to people watch, and to really try to understand what was animating this unprecedented social upheaval. On that sweltering, humid July Saturday

night in Tel Aviv, one thing became absolutely clear. This moment is not about the intricacies and technicalities of judicial reform. With all due respect to the many lawyers, government officials, and at least one judge in the room, **nobody gets that excited about judicial reform.** That's not to say it isn't important or even central to the healthy functioning of a democracy, but this moment is about an angst that is much deeper than checks and balances, or which body has the authority to overturn which law. After spending several more weeks in Israel trying to get my head around this issue, especially with the help of author and journalist, Yossi Klein Halevi, with whom I had the privilege of studying at the Shalom Hartman Institute, I think I understand a little bit better what is animating this struggle, and why it should, why it *must* matter to you and me. Before you get your hackles up...This is not 'Raskin being political.' This is 'Raskin laying out the issues' that I think we all must understand if we are to understand beyond the headlines the significance of this moment for the Jewish state and the Jewish people.

A few weeks ago, I was speaking with one of Sari's cousins who has lived in Israel since making aliya in 1969. I wanted to know what she remembered about this day, 50 years ago. "Honey" is her name, and she related that it was Yom Kippur, and she was in her synagogue in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Beit Ha'Kerem where she lived, and that the cantor from her former shul in Metuchen, N.J. who had also made aliyah was leading the service. Only at a certain point in the middle of the davening, he stopped chanting. Honey looked around and saw young men getting up and leaving the synagogue one by one. The cantor said, "I've never led services during a war, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do now." Before long everyone was on their way to the nearest safe room. Honey's son, who was in 5th grade at the time, reminded his parents of what he learned in school: *Shut off the gas in the house before going down to the safe room, to prevent an even greater explosion should the house be hit by a rocket.* The streets in Israel are completely empty on Yom Kippur. Families walk right down the center of major thoroughfare. Kids ride their bikes in the middle of otherwise traffic congested streets. That quiet was pierced by the sounds of tanks rumbling down Herzl Boulevard. Honey and her family spent the next several hours huddled around the radio. The next day they were already hearing from friends and neighbors about their sons who were killed on the Bar Lev Line along the Suez Canal. She remembered food rationing, as bread and eggs and other essentials were sent to the front. She told me about painting the headlights of her car blue to avoid detection when driving at night. And how she and her husband volunteered to shuttle soldiers to their meetup points to be taken to battle, wondering if they would ever return home. This was Yom Kippur in Israel, 50 years ago today. A country that was only 25 years old, and had already endured the War of Independence, the rise of Palestinian Fedayeen attacks, the Six Day War, and the War of Attrition. I asked Honey if the Yom Kippur War gave her any second thoughts about making a life in Israel with her young family. She answered no, without hesitation. She said, we lived through that war, and we lived through other wars and terrorist attacks since then. We decided that this is our home no matter what. That right there represents the dogged Israeli determination to survive at all costs.

It's really quite extraordinary when you think about it: after bus bombings, suicide attacks in restaurants, cafes; airplane hijackings. The massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972. Car-rammings, stabbing sprees, terror tunnels, the first Intifada from 1987-1993, and the second from 2000-2005. Indiscriminate rocket fire driving Israeli civilians back into their safe rooms time and again since the Gaza Withdrawal in 2005, and one violent attack after another planned and occasionally carried out from the ungovernable depths of West Bank refugee camps.

And if that blood-soaked history wasn't enough, Israel has had to defend its very existence time and again in halls of power like the UN, in the international press, on the college campus, at church synods; it has to constantly repudiate charges of being a colonial state, an apartheid state, an illegal state. You don't see boycott, divestment, or sanctions movements against Vladimir Putin's Russia, which is prosecuting a horrific war that sends missiles into Ukrainian apartment buildings and drones to incinerate food and medical supplies. You don't see people burning the Iranian flag or the Chinese flag at Berkley or Rutgers, on Harvard Square or on the Quad at Penn for flagrant, egregious human rights abuses, rampant killings of minorities, indiscriminate jailing of political detractors...no, instead China is awarded a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. And Iran is chairing the annual forum of the Human Rights Council in Geneva this year! And just a few weeks ago Mahmoud Abbas, the 87-year-old leader of the Palestinian Authority gave a rambling speech that included outlandish claim that Hitler was not actually an anti-Semite. He hated Jews for other reasons, but not because they were Jewish. You can't make this stuff up! This is supposed to be a peace partner?

I want you to take your fingers now and press them against your neck. Do you feel the blood pulsing through your artery? How many of you feel your blood pressure rising? If you want to understand what's going on in Israel right now you have to understand that the current governing coalition in Israel is filled with a "Jewish rage," to use Yossi Klein Halevi's words. A Jewish rage that that even after the Holocaust, Jews, inconceivably, are still targeted for violence and death. That the State of Israel, at the very moment it was declaring independence was under attack from its enemies and that attack has never really ended. It's just gone from one war or attack or denunciation after another. There is a mentality of victimhood that runs through the current governing coalition, and a sense that Israel should once and for all wield its overwhelming power to defend the dignity of the Jewish people, to protect Israelis from all possible enemies or perceived dangers, and perhaps even to avenge spilled Jewish blood. When National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir declares: "*Achshav ani adon ha'aretz*, Now I am the master of this land," he means that Jews will not capitulate to anyone else's demands from the Jordan to the Mediterranean. If you want to really understand this moment, you have to understand that visceral sense of victimhood and Jewish rage. And we know that the combination of rage and victimhood is combustible. It is a dangerous brew that intoxicates, and even justifies violence and revenge attacks.

Add to that mix a resurgent ultra-Orthodox, Haredi population for whom the Holocaust also still looms large. Nearly every yeshiva in Eastern Europe was decimated. 90% of the rabbis alive before the Holocaust were dead by the end of it. David Ben Gurion thought that the Ultra-Orthodox community could never recover from that blow. But it has! Not only are there hundreds, maybe thousands of yeshivot all across the land, the Haredi population is by far the fastest growing in Israel. And they are making demands not only for their own enclaves but for control of religious affairs in Israel's public spaces too.

And while you're at it, add to that mix Mizrachi Israelis, those who came from Arab countries, around the Middle East and north Africa, and who since the beginning of the state have felt like second class citizens to the Ashkenazi Israeli elite. Of Israel's 20 prime ministers, from Ben Gurion to Bibi, all have been Ashkenazi. Of Israel's 11 presidents, a largely ceremonial office, only two were Mizrachi, Yitzhak Navon and Moshe Katzav. Other seats of power in Israel, *from the army to the Supreme Court*, are overwhelmingly Ashkenazi as well. This is a coalition of the aggrieved, the exasperated, the angry.

On the other end of the spectrum are many of the people who show up at the protests every weekend. Liberal Zionists left wing Israelis who have lost a tremendous amount of political clout. The Israeli left is vanquished. A Labor or left-wing prime minister has not been elected since Ehud Barak left office in 2001. The left-wing parties are in shambles: Labor has only 4 seats in the current Knesset compared to Likud's 32. Fifty years ago, during the Yom Kippur War, Labor had 51 seats in the Knesset! There is a true sense of loss and disillusionment that liberal government seems to be a thing of the past. Judicial reform, they imagine, could be the final nail in the coffin. And they are terrified that other civil rights could be eroded too. There was a jarring site at that Saturday night Tel Aviv demonstration. A group of women stood together in formation, heads bowed under white bonnets, dressed in floor length the red cloaks like the characters in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaids Tail*. Many women are afraid that a government under the sway of far-right parties will curtail their rights, and perhaps impose rules like gender segregation in public places, or weaken gender equality laws, or legitimize other forms of discrimination. LGBTQ Israelis fear being targeted, particularly when some of the current government ministers have openly expressed their homophobia. Liberal Israelis, even those in the modern Orthodox camp and our fellow Masorti Jews, fear extensive religious coercion, and that Israel is on course to becoming another Middle East theocracy. They are also weary of being an occupying power; it is demoralizing to them that the Palestinian issue is still unresolved six stubborn decades later, and that the expansion of settlements will keep Israel entangled with the West Bank in perpetuity. They look at the surging Haredi population with tremendous resentment. It is their sons and daughters, not the Haredim, who don Israel's uniform and protect the country. It is largely the ingenuity and savvy of the tech sector in liberal Tel Aviv that has made Israel the Start Up Nation we are all so proud of. It has been predominantly secular Israelis who have made Israel an international hub of innovation, scientific prowess, and multi-billion-dollar industry. But already in the first half of 2023, 118 out of 260 Israeli start-ups decided to incorporate outside of Israel. 52 tech firms are in the process of reincorporating to become U.S. companies. One in four Israelis have seriously considered leaving the country. That's not the Zionist dream, it's the Zionist nightmare! The prospect of Israel becoming less liberal and less democratic is driving these trends. Liberal Israelis look at the Haredi sector, 52% of which live below the poverty line and wonder if they are going to have to support this burgeoning population. With 90% of Haredim enjoying a de facto exemption from the Army, non-Haredi Israelis feel the burden of the nation's defense overwhelmingly on their shoulders and their children's. Again, a Supreme Court that would uphold and codify that exemption is a major concern.

There are of course other issues at stake from corrupt and criminal politicians to strained relations with the diaspora; suffice it to say that there is a major schism happening in Israel right now. As I made my way around Israel, speaking to family and friends, listening to lectures, reading the newspapers, I thought of what Moshe Dayan, the celebrated Israeli general who so badly miscalculated the invasion the led to the Yom Kippur War, told Golda Meir: "The Third Commonwealth may be destroyed!" Offering to resign, Dayan told the Prime Minister, "We are headed to catastrophe." I believe there are many Israelis who have similar worries 50 years later. Since I first traveled to Israel when I was 16 years old, and the scores of times since, I have never heard anyone doubt the long-term survival of the country...until this summer. It was very unsettling to say the least. But there was also something electrifying on the streets on those Saturday nights in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. There is a palpable energy, a rock-solid commitment to the cause, a refusal to capitulate. There is an inescapable patriotism; the banner of this cause

from right to left is the Israeli flag itself. I can't even begin to describe what a sea of tens of thousands of blue and white flags looks like. It took my breath away. This experiment in Jewish sovereignty simply cannot fail.

As Israel negotiated a cease-fire with Egypt 50 years ago, Golda remained steadfast about the return of Israeli prisoners of war as a precondition to peace with Sadat. She locked horns with Henry Kissinger over this issue. He wanted the treaty signed and the war over without delay. But the intrepid Golda went to work rallying support from members of Congress and other political heavyweights in Washington. One Israeli diplomat commented, "The Almighty placed massive oil deposits under Arab soil. It is our good fortune that God placed five million Jews in America." The influence and power of the American Jewish community was mobilized for Israel then, and you better believe those POWs returned home. Everywhere I went this summer, Israelis said, don't abandon us now. We need you, our friends and partners in the Diaspora. We need you to be part of the conversation. I thought of the Torah portion from my bar mitzvah: Parashat Matot, when two of the 12 tribes informed Moses that they won't be entering the promised land with the rest of the Jewish people; that they planned to remain east of the Jordan River. Moses was scandalized and angrily responded: *Ha'acheichem yavo'u lemilchama v'atem teishvu fo*. Your brothers are going off to war, but you are just going to stay here?¹ It was the very first conflict between Israel and the Diaspora. But the Tribes of Reuven and Gad reassured Moses that remaining outside of the borders of Eretz Yisrael did not mean that they were shirking their responsibility for their fellow Jews. On the contrary, they promised Moses that they would be there, right by their side, every step of the way. We are the Reubenites and the Gadites of today! And today there aren't 5 million American Jews there are 7.6 million. During the Yom Kippur war, there were just over 3 million Jews in Israel. Today there are almost 10 million. Then as now, we are responsible for our fellow Jews in Eretz Yisrael. Listen to the words of Israel's Declaration of Independence: *Anu korim el ha'am ha'Yehudi bechol hatfutzot lehitlaked saviv ha'yishuv...la'amod leyameinu*, "We call upon the entire Jewish people, throughout the diaspora, to rally around the Jews in the Land of Israel and stand by them as they build this nation and fulfill this dream of Jewish redemption." Though that proclamation was made 75 years ago, it is still in force today. If you believe that Israel is critical to the Jewish people; if you shudder at the thought of a world without the Jewish state, we need to rally around the Jews in the land of Israel today. Whether you are a left winger or a right winger; a dove or a hawk; a supporter of judicial reform or an opponent of it, Israel's future hangs in the balance. God forbid we should abandon her in this hour of need.

In the 2 weeks and 5 days of the Yom Kippur War, nearly 3,000 Israelis fell in battle, and more than 7,000 were seriously injured. As Israel came to terms with the ravages of yet another war, its singer/songwriter laureate, Naomi Shemer, composed a song of hope called *Lu Yehi*. Perhaps you sang it at a Jewish summer camp or learned it in a youth group. Maybe you remember when it was originally released in '73. I heard an absolutely beautiful rendition this past Friday morning at JDS.

The song begins:

Od yesh mifras lavan ba'ofek

¹ Numbers 32:6

Mul anan shachor kaved

Kol she-nivakesh lu yehi

There is a white sail on the horizon

Against a heavy black cloud.

All that we yearn for, may it be

Lu yehi lu yehi ana lu yehi

Kol she-nivakesh lu yehi

May it be, may it be, please, may it be

All that we yearn for may it be.

Then as now the white sail of hope stands in contrast to the heavy black clouds of fear and angst.

And we pray now as so many did then, *kol she'nivakesh, ana, lu yehi.*

All that we yearn for, please may it be. May God bless the Jewish people and the State of Israel with peace, safety, unity, and a better future for all its inhabitants, hopefully in this new year. *Kol she'nivakesh lu yehi.*