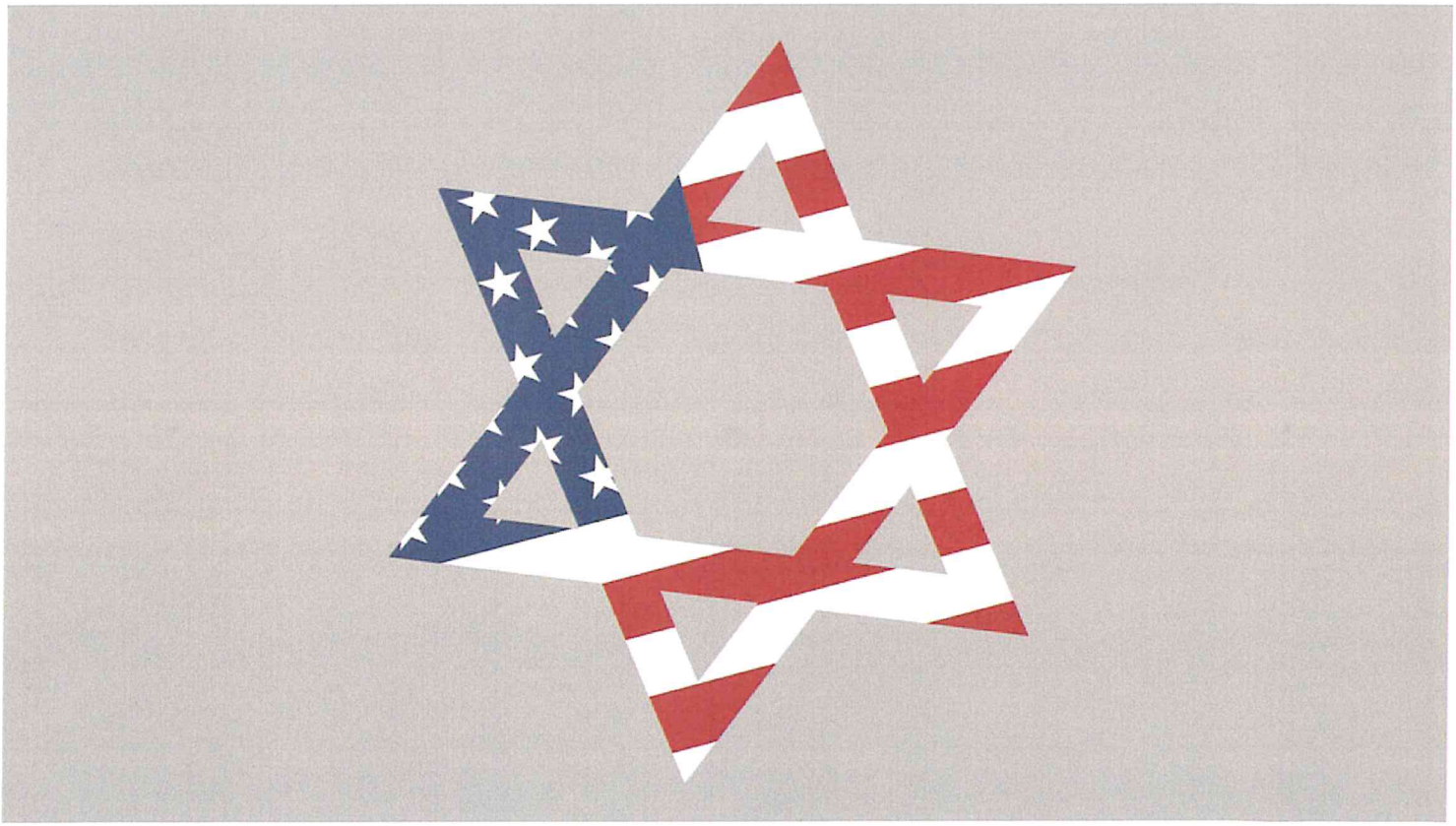
IDEAS

Israel's Problems Are Not Like America's

When many Westerners peer out at the world, what they're really looking for is a mirror.

By Matti Friedman



The Atlantic

MAY 24, 2021

About the author: *Matti Friedman is an Israeli journalist and the author, most recently, of* Spies of No Country: Secret Lives at the Birth of Israel.

REREADING *EXODUS*, THE schmaltzy 1958 best seller about Israel that became a Hollywood movie starring Paul Newman, I was surprised by something I hadn't noticed as a teenager. The author, Leon Uris, describes a utopia of brave young pioneers in khaki shorts, farming when possible and fighting when necessary, quoting Bible verses as they hook up in ancient ruins, and so forth. But the novel isn't just a fantasy about Israel, as I'd remembered, or even primarily that: It's about America. *Exodus* says less about the country where it's set than about an American tendency, one very much in evidence this month, to imagine people here in Israel as a reflection of themselves.

"She was one of those great American traditions like Mom's apple pie, hot dogs, and the Brooklyn Dodgers" is how Uris describes his main female character, Kitty Fremont, a nurse who isn't Jewish but finds herself embroiled in Israel's War of Independence. The male lead, Ari Ben Canaan, is a blond frontiersman, tough yet sensitive, who knows his way around good cognac, the foxtrot, and an automatic rifle. He's a Jew worthy of the great American tradition embodied by Kitty, and *Exodus* ends with them together. That seems, in fact, like the point of the book.

When Uris was writing in the 1950s, most Israeli Jews were natives of the Islamic world who'd either been drawn to the new state or forced from their home by their former neighbors. Many of the rest were survivors of the Holocaust trying to hack out a living without losing what was left of their mind. They lived alongside a sizable Muslim Arab minority, a remnant of those displaced by the war, feared as a fifth column and kept under military rule. Kibbutznik pioneers like Ari Ben Canaan were never more than a tiny share of the population—and as committed socialists, would never have gone anywhere near the foxtrot. Few people here were blond. A more representative hero for *Exodus* would have been the Arabic-speaking seamstress from the Jewish ghetto in Marrakech.

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But *Exodus* wasn't about representation, or about a strange country in the Middle East. It was an attempt to get American readers to look at Israel and see themselves. Ari Ben Canaan was a hero from the America of Ernest Hemingway and John Wayne. He was a blue-eyed, chiseled, gorgeous Paul Newman.

Although a close relationship between America and Israel has been taken for granted over the past half century, it solidified only once Americans decided that Israelis were like them. In novels and countless press reports about pioneers and fighters in the '50s, "Israel and Jews came to be perceived as masculine, ready to fight the Cold War alongside America," the scholar Michelle Mart wrote in her study of the topic, *Eye on*

Israel. "By contrast, Arabs were increasingly stigmatized as non-Western, undemocratic, racially darker, unmasculine outsiders."

RECOMMENDED READING

The Case for Industrial Food
CONOR FRIEDERSDORF

Yair Lapid: Extremist Violence Is a 'Stain on Israel'
YAIR ROSENBERG

The Paperwork Coup
DAVID A. GRAHAM

"In the images of Israelis, then," she wrote, "Americans constructed their own self-image at mid-century."

That construction has been on my mind this month as disturbing events unfolding here have been picked up and interpreted abroad. Many Americans are now using their image of home to construct their image of Israel. Indeed, for some on the progressive left, the conflict between Jews and Muslims 6,000 miles east of Washington, D.C., has become jumbled up with American ideas about race.

"WHAT THEY ARE doing to the Palestinian people is what they continue to do to our Black brothers and sisters here," Representative Rashida Tlaib of Michigan shouted to applause at a rally earlier this month, leaving listeners to ponder the word *they*. Celebrities tweeted the phrase "Palestinian Lives Matter," echoing the American protests for racial justice. "Until all our children are safe," Representative Cori Bush of Missouri told the House, "we will continue to fight for our rights in Palestine and in Ferguson."

I first encountered this sort of American projection about 15 years ago, as a local reporter working for a U.S. news service. A few Israeli motorists had been murdered by Palestinian gunmen on a road between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv that cuts through the West Bank. The army had closed the road to Palestinian traffic, allowing access only to drivers, Jews and Arabs, with Israeli license plates. This decision was effective;

the shootings stopped. One of my colleagues in the bureau, a recent arrival from America, asked if we could now say that the road was "segregated."

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Since arriving from Canada as a teenager in the mid-'90s, I'd always tried to understand this place, with its singular complications and steep inequalities, on its own terms. But I realized that when many Westerners peer out at the world, what they're really looking for is a mirror.

The story of the Jewish minority in Europe and in the Islamic world, which is the story of Israel, has nothing to do with race in America. My grandmother's parents and siblings were shot outside their village in Poland by people the same color as them. If you stand on a street in the modern state of Israel and look at passersby, you often can't tell who's Jewish and who's Arab. Many Israelis are from Arab countries, and for the 6 million Jews living in the heart of the Arab world (300 million people) and in the broader Islamic world (1.5 billion people), the question of who's the minority is obviously a tricky one. Most Black people here are Jews with roots in Ethiopia. The occupation of the West Bank is supported by many Israelis mainly because they have rational fears of rockets and suicide bombings, tactics that weren't quite the ones endorsed by the American civil-rights movement. All of this is to say that although Israel, like America, is deeply messed up, it's messed up in completely different ways.

Nonetheless, the belief in a fundamental similarity has caught on. While following the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, which to me seemed just and necessary, I saw a sign that read FROM FERGUSON TO PALESTINE. This was puzzling: American soldiers still occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, and American aid money was flowing to repressive regimes throughout the Middle East and beyond. If activists were seeking foreign inspiration for a domestic movement, they had hundreds of ongoing ethnic conflicts to choose from. But something about Palestine struck Americans as relevant to their own experience.

That sentiment has moved into elite opinion. In 2019, *The New York Times* published an op-ed by the respected scholar Michelle Alexander, the author of an important book on incarceration, that described Israel's conflict with the Palestinians as "one of the great moral challenges of our time," the scene of "practices reminiscent of apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow segregation in the United States." The essay didn't explain why this conflict constitutes one of the great moral challenges or offer any indication that the author had ever visited Israel. Last year the *Times* ran an essay by the author Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Pulitzer Prize winner and a college professor in Los Angeles, that ridiculed "white writers" for their "white privilege," identified the

American dream as "settler colonialism," and then segued into an attack on Israelis as settler colonialists.

For these Americans, distant Jews have become an embodiment of the American evil, racial oppression. People have always projected fantasies onto other places and groups, but this particular type of projection, in which Jews are displayed as the prime symbol of whatever's wrong, has a long history. When it surfaces, it usually heralds an impatience with logical analysis and normal politics, and a move toward magical thinking.

Micah Goodman: How to shrink the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

In some ways, Americans haven't progressed from the "Israeli" pioneer of *Exodus*, who's white and blond and seems so awfully familiar. We're still stuck with Ari Ben Canaan— except now he's a racist. And if Palestinians were disdained in the old novels and reportage as non-Western, dark, and unmasculine, they're still more or less kept in the same world of stereotypes—except those attributes are no longer considered negative. This helps explain, for example, the passivity of Palestinians in many Western accounts of what's going on here, and why Western reporters are drawn to the tragedy of Palestinian civilians while remaining relatively uninterested in the ruthless strategy and significant accomplishments of the Palestinians' Iran-backed military force, Hamas. In both the old and new versions of the fantasy, Israelis are actors and Palestinians are props.

WESTERN OBSERVERS ARE OFTEN tempted to see foreign countries as mirrors of their own, because it makes a story more compelling for members of their audience, who are interested—who isn't?—mainly in themselves. And it means they can analyze other societies without going to the considerable trouble of studying them, learning their language, or even visiting. So Narendra Modi of India is Donald Trump, and France's problem is racial inequality, and Dutch conservatives are Republicans. It's seductive to think that everything you need to know you learned back in Berkeley.

But believing that foreign countries operate according to American logic is a recipe for confusion, even disaster. Many Americans looking at Iraq in the early years of this century, for example, saw a democracy-in-waiting stymied only by a cruel dictator. America then took steps that resulted, directly and indirectly, in hundreds of thousands of deaths, including those of more than 4,500 American soldiers, with little to show for it. The world is not a mirror. The world is a kaleidoscope that can be understood only by people who are experts in each individual shard, and even then only partially.

The truth is that Israel is a small country in the Middle East that has nothing to do with the demons stalking America. We have our own demons. Conflating them won't make either country's problems easier to understand or solve.