

## Israel's Mission

by Shlomo Ben-Ami

JERUSALEM – Israel is one of the biggest success stories of modern times. A nation was reborn out of Holocaust survivors and uprooted Jewish communities who, mostly through the quality of their human capital, built a booming economy, created one of the world's most innovative agricultures, and revived a dead language. They also sustained, against all odds, a democracy that, however imperfect and dysfunctional, is nonetheless amazingly vibrant.

And yet, at its 60th anniversary, Israel stands at a crossroads. Indeed, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has warned of “the end of the Jewish state” if the country remains bogged down in the occupied territories and a Palestinian state is not established.

Israel's internal challenges are no less demanding. The relatively homogeneous society envisaged by its founders has fragmented into a tense multi-ethnic tapestry comprising secular Jews, an alienated Arab minority, a prolific ultra-orthodox community living on state allowances, religious nationalists bent on a Messianic brand of Zionism, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, marginalized Ethiopians, and Oriental Jews still struggling to join the middle class.

Moreover, Israel has failed to redress a dangerous imbalance: however creative its economy may be, the burden of military expenditure is undermining its investment in education and scientific research.

Metaphorically, Israel's national psyche oscillates between “Tel Aviv” and “Jerusalem.” “Tel Aviv” embraces secularism, hedonism, and economic growth, and views the State of Israel as a legal entity, in contrast to the dangerous, faith-driven “Jerusalemite” concept of “Eretz Israel.” It has replaced Israel's early pioneering ethos with the temptations of modernity, liberalism, and “normalcy.” It aspires to be part of the “global village,” not an isolated, parochial Jewish outpost.

By contrast, “Jerusalem” regards “Tel Aviv's” drive for “normalcy” as a shallow affair, one that is almost criminally indifferent to Jewish memory and the lessons of Jewish history. The Israel of “Jerusalem” is one of yearning for Jewish roots, a deep-seated fear of “the Arabs,” and an unyielding distrust of “Gentiles” and their “international community.”

Israel was born in war and has lived by the sword ever since. Rarely in history has a national movement marched to its Promised Land with such a brilliant display of

diplomatic savoir-faire and military skill as the Zionists did on their way to statehood. But Israel's breathtaking victory against three Arab armies in 1967 brought it not only grandeur, but also moral and political decay. Forty-one years later, Israel is still incapable of extricating itself from the corrupting occupation of Palestinian lands, and from the folly of settlements.

This is the paradox of Israel's existence: a sense of power combined with an ever-present apocalyptic fear of annihilation, reflected in its hostile reaction to any initiative that touches its physical security. Of course, Jews' historical experience is not conducive to easy conciliation. The crisis of the Jewish conscience in the traumatic transition from Holocaust to statehood has not yet been fully overcome. Israel always, it seems, opts for a fatalistic interpretation of regional challenges, and its agonizing task today is to adopt a radical change of strategy by overcoming its leaders' traditional tendency to make decisions only on the basis of worst-case scenarios.

It has been a sadly recurrent condition of the Arab-Israeli conflict that no war lost by a humiliated Arab side has ever ushered in a peace settlement, just as no war overwhelmingly won by Israel has ever led its leaders to be magnanimous in victory. Peace efforts began almost invariably thanks to Arab, not Israeli, moves. Such was the case of the 1973 war, which was started by President Anwar Sadat with the aim of forcing the United States to broker an Egyptian-Israeli peace. Likewise, the Palestinian Intifada of 1987 forced Israel to abandon the politics of inertia and engage in a process that culminated in the Oslo accords.

Zionism's unique combination of democracy and utopianism enabled the Jews to recover their birthright and gave them a key to the future. The same tools must be used to end the conflict with the Arab world, in particular with the Palestinians. The Jews did not survive extermination only to entrench themselves behind walls of their own making. They survived in order to resolve what for too long has looked like an insoluble conundrum: legitimizing Jewish statehood in the eyes of those who consider themselves its victims.

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