

OPEN SPACE – PERSPECTIVES

Israel's Postmodern Condition

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ABSTRACT: Israeli society is mired in a postmodern condition: Most Israelis have lost faith in an overarching world view and lost contact with a metanarrative; the average Israeli no longer has a cognitive map with which to discern good from evil, to perceive cause and effect, and to decide what is morally either correct or reprehensible; the rational infrastructure of our lives has crumbled and begun to vanish; the connection has blurred between effective means and the desired ends they were meant to achieve; beginning and end have lost their meaning, leaving a void without limits or boundaries to territory, time and the definition of our collective identity. It is difficult to conceive of a way out of this condition.

By the accepted criteria that define this term, today Israeli society finds itself in a postmodern condition. First, the realities of our daily existence create inexplicable and seemingly irrational experiences, with no apparent connection to known causes or foreseeable consequences. Israel's citizens do not encounter a rational infrastructure solidly underpinning their daily reality. Daily experience is arbitrary, random and fortuitous. Second, as part of this reality, most Israelis are losing their ties to an all-encompassing world view that gives meaning to the different conditions and events in their lives. Most Israelis are cut off from any overarching ideology whatsoever, from any cognitive map, identification with any absolute principle, or, in postmodern terminology, any meta-narrative. Third, this condition ensues, in part, from our living in a space with neither beginning nor end, unbounded and unsignified from the perspective of our collective identity and temporal and geographic perspectives. We are losing the coordinates, the beacons, the signposts essential to understanding our condition and ourselves. Fourth, as a result of the first three points, the hierarchies of moral and aesthetic values that were accepted in the past are now crumbling, and we are

being cast into an unbounded and uncharted labyrinth, in which our focus has shifted from broad public and collective concerns to narrow personal and private goals, and in which we are satisfied merely to endeavor day-to-day survival, nothing more.

The most conspicuous Israeli endeavor to find some connection, however dim and seemingly nonexistent, between a known cause and a foreseeable outcome, involves the topic at the head of our agenda today: the struggle against terrorism. Due to the fact that the efforts to curtail terrorism elicit anger and hatred and vengefulness, they stimulate recruitment of new members to terrorist organizations. Thus, all diminution of terrorist activity is accompanied by its exacerbation. In the struggle against terrorism, victory is inextricably linked to defeat. It is as impossible to conquer as it is to be conquered by it; however, this has not always been the case. In the past, an act such as destroying the Iraqi nuclear facility brought with it an extended period devoid of imminent threat. Now, even killing a thousand terrorists, or blowing up hundreds of explosives plants, or imposing a curfew on all West Bank cities cannot ensure a cessation of terrorism. Despite all these measures, nothing can guarantee that today, or tomorrow, or the next day, a new suicidal bomber or other, cold-blooded murderer, will not terrorize an Israeli city or highway.

As it is impossible to win, so is it equally impossible to lose in the struggle against terrorism. With each action of the Israeli Defense Forces, or with every action of any kind, it may be argued that, had that action not taken place, terrorist activity would be even greater. One can always argue that the situation could be worse, and one can always word one's arguments in such a way that any given action can be viewed as having prevented the situation from deteriorating even further, making the arguments impossible to refute. One could argue, for example, that some ritual observance has kept the situation from worsening, and who could disapprove that? Our experience has taught us that innocent civilians are murdered at least once a month, with all the accompanying horror, and that one day it will end; but, for now, nothing we can do can hasten that day's coming.

Not only military action, but practical, political activity as well eludes rational understanding. Labor Party ministers, while members of the governing coalition, did not want the government to show real achievement, lest the national unity government receive the credit, a government that the Labor Party eventually attempted to supersede. Likud Party ministers also endeavored not to "succeed too much", for fear of succeeding to the point of failure, which is to say, succeeding to the point of removing Yasser Arafat and his supporters, an act that they fear would clear the way for a Palestinian state, according to the guidelines set forth by President Bush and with the support of the entire world - save the

Likud Party. From the standpoint of both parties, then, it has been crucial neither to succeed nor to fail, but only to give an appearance of meaningful action.

Another example is the Israeli public that, according to opinion poll results, does not necessarily intend to vote for a party that espouses the attitudes the public professes to maintain. In most polls, the majority of respondents indicates its willingness for Israel to make sweeping concessions to the Palestinians, yet the majority also states its intention to vote for right-wing parties that have expressed their unwillingness to make such concessions. Apparently, the public assumes that no relation necessarily exists between what a party declares and what a party actually intends to do, or between what it does and what outcomes these actions produce. The contest between left and right, between Labor and Likud, resembles a soccer match between two local teams. Each side has its rabid supporters, who want very much to see their side victorious and their rival humiliated, all the while knowing that the outcome of the contest bears no impact on truly important issues - war or peace, unemployment or economic growth, conflict or harmony among diverse groups within the broader society.

The state of the economy also embodies the lack of a predictable connection between cause and effect. Israel's economic state can be described using the term popularized during the final quarter of the last century: stagflation, a puzzling and ruinous conjoining of stagnation and inflation that casts doubt on the seminal principles of rational economic theory that were widely agreed upon up until the 1970s. Now it cannot safely be said exactly how much a society needs to pay in the coin of increased unemployment to reduce inflation by any given amount. The Phillips Curve that once attempted to predict exactly this relation is irrelevant to the Israeli economic condition. Everyone knows that high rates of economic growth cure stagflation, but no one has an exact, general prescription for generating high rates of economic growth in a society suffering from stagflation. A few specific cures have worked here and there, while others have not, but there is no existing universal economic cure. Stagflation remains a classic example of the collapse of the belief in economic cause and effect, a challenge to the rational infrastructure of objective reality. Compounding this, the situation in Israel continues to defy explanation. It is widely assumed that the ongoing Palestinian intifada (uprising) and concomitant lack of security have caused Israel's current economic difficulties, yet no one knows how to cope with the economic stresses caused by the intifada so long as it continues, or how to end the intifada, or even if, when it ends - if it ends - Israel's economy will recover, or if it will be able to face new economic difficulties brought about by still unforeseeable events.

For the sake of balance, it should be noted that the Palestinians, too, could neither succeed nor fail in attempting to achieve their goals through the use

of terrorism. No additional terrorist attack, horrific though it may be, can achieve the classic goal of terrorism: to terrify the public to the point that it changes its attitudes. Quite the contrary, most Israelis who support a negotiated settlement prefer that Israel delay making any concessions until terrorism has been defeated entirely. Terrorist acts have not caused Israel to reduce its use of force; they have only elicited a greater employment of force. By the same token, like Israel, the Palestinians are incapable of failure. As do we, they can argue that every one of their actions has prevented the situation from worsening, that without their acts of terrorism, Israel would not have made even the few concessions it has thus far, for, in the parlance of the Middle East. They (the Israelis or the Arabs) only understand the language of force. In sum, neither can understand the other's language. Neither can foresee the consequences of their actions. Neither people perceive a logical connection, on which they can rely, between any controllable event and any desirable outcome.

Moreover, experience has also disproved the seemingly rational arguments of two dominant forces within the Israeli political spectrum. Proponents of Greater Israel now know that creating more and more settlements will not help bring about Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank or Gaza. The Israeli Peace Camp now knows that even granting sweeping concessions will not induce the Palestinians to desire peace with the Jewish state, as was made clear at Camp David and in Taba two years ago. What remains is a highly volatile atmosphere, filled with strong emotions - deep resentment and broken dreams - but devoid of logic. The rational latticework that was meant to hold our existence together, to serve as an infrastructure and basis for understanding our experience, has broken and crumbled - if it ever even existed. This is the first defining feature of Israel's postmodern experience.

The second characteristic of our existence is the almost total break most Israelis have made from any overarching ideology, guiding daily activities and giving meaning to ongoing behavior. Israelis are cut off from the meta-schemas that daily imbue otherwise random events with meaning and value. The same holds true for the Palestinians. When the first suicide/homicide bombers exploded onto the scene, it seemed as if we were familiar with the text from which they drew their inspiration, a text drawn from certain interpretations of Islamic faith. Today, given the diversity of these suicidal killers - many are attached to secular organizations, some have been women, some not only secular, but highly educated as well - we realize that we hardly begin to comprehend the text that inspires them. Apparently, Palestinian actions draw inspiration from an intertextual weave, an unexplainable mix of quotes drawn from anti-Semitic, anti-Western and anti-secular declarations, and reactions to Israel's occupying land in 1967, and in 1948 as well, from reactions against globalization and the moral

degeneration of modernization - and additional, similar motifs. The one common denominator is an intense and parochial emotional reaction, lacking any reasoned argumentation or rationality and characterized by deep hatred or anger or protest or merely the desire for some impalpable and undefined outcome, any outcome, its nature meaningless compared with the sheer intensity of the emotion itself. After the Oslo Agreement, it is nearly impossible to discern a Palestinian meta-narrative, unified in its conception and universal in its application, a general principle that can guide Palestinian political and diplomatic activity. One may argue over the specific advantages and disadvantages of the Oslo Agreement, but one cannot deny that the process did take place, because it took place - our own seemingly unified conception of the conflict crumbled. We are now driven by raging emotions and not ordered, rational concepts.

Furthermore, the all-encompassing ideologies that various groups within Israeli society set forth have become hollow, meaningless descriptions, *simulacra* in the terminology of the French philosopher, Baudrillard. Although it is unacceptable to criticize our hegemonious ideology, Zionism, nevertheless, careful scrutiny easily reveals that nearly nothing valid remains of Zionist axioms. The assumption that Jewish existence cannot be maintained in the diaspora is invalidated daily. Indeed, in the diaspora, Jewish existence includes more freedom of choice than in Israel. In the diaspora, one can be identified as Reform, Progressive, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Modern Orthodox - all without facing discrimination. This is the antithesis of Jewish expression in Israel, where adherents of alternative expressions of Jewishness face legalized discrimination that has been codified in formal Israeli law. The Zionist assumption that the Land of Israel is the only safe, or at least the safest place for Jews, today sounds like a cruel joke. Even the Zionist assumption that the birth of the Jewish state would bring an end to anti-Semitism has been completely nullified. Not only has anti-Semitism not disappeared or even diminished, it flourishes, and to a not insubstantial extent, it is an Israeli export to the rest of the world.

Even the seemingly universally accepted tenet that Israel is a Jewish-democratic state has been cast in doubt. Most Israelis do not subscribe to any ideology that can be described as holding out Jewishness and democracy as its central and defining tenets. A legally sanctioned wedding ceremony in Israel conforms to a single, narrow and rigidly defined set of official religious rules. Arab neighbors of Jewish residents in West Bank towns such as Ofra and Kedumim do not enjoy the same civil rights as their Jewish neighbors, including the right to choose their own government. In both examples, most Israelis appear willing to agree to this status quo. The willingness, even if reluctant, to agree to this dual state of affairs, and similar others, testifies to the extent of Israelis'

detachment from even the most elementary component of democratic ideology. The fact that the Jewish majority of Israel enjoys many democratic rights is transient, for in less than a decade the Jewish citizens of Israel stand to become a minority. At that point the country will not only cease to be democratic, it will cease to be Jewish, as well.

The various all-encompassing ideologies once embraced by different Israeli groups - socialism, liberalism, communism, ultra-nationalism - have all disappeared as readable and binding texts, they remain as mere sentimental moods. Very few still cling to these ideologies, perhaps out of nostalgia, moralism, or preening - for their own sake or for the sake of others. The loss of connection to an overarching ideology has left many communication symbols devoid of content and meaning, as the symbols themselves lose their connection to the concepts and categories they symbolize. Accordingly, the public discourse in Israel today resembles a Piagetian monologue or a modern tower of Babel; a great many collective traits of Israeli society flow from this aspect of the discourse. In any case, this is the second defining feature of Israel's postmodern experience: its separation from any normative, all-embracing conception.

The third defining feature of Israel's postmodern experience is living in a space unbounded and unsignified from a perspective of collective identity and temporal and geographic perspectives. From a collective identity standpoint, many Israeli citizens feel a growing uncertainty regarding the boundaries of social categories and experience increasing difficulty in identifying with these. The formal collective identity, Israeli citizen, has long lost its meaningfulness. Reference and membership groups within and beyond this formal category have made its boundaries irrelevant. The seminal collective identity that now serves a great many residents of Israel is the secular Israeli Jew who served in the army. This social network affords a communication space that serves the plurality, and perhaps the majority, of Israel's citizens. Within this communication space the defining Israeli culture has grown for those who accept this term. Nevertheless, even the boundaries of *this* space are becoming blurred, challenged by other collectives that offer alternative means of identification. For example, many non-Jews share a partial identification with this space: Druze and Beduin who serve in the army; Moslems and Christians living within Israel or in the West Bank and who place themselves within the Palestinian collective, yet live under Israeli jurisdiction; Christians who arrived along with the large-scale wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union; the more than three hundred thousand foreign workers, many of whom are now raising their children in Israel and building new Israeli communities. Millions of diasporan Jews inhabit a space outside the ostensibly seminal Israeli collective, yet many of them identify with Israel, in some sense, as their country. Reciprocally, many Israelis identify deeply

with these Jews. To further complicate this network of identities, this diaspora collective includes many expatriate Israelis. Another group includes ultra-orthodox Jews, who are busy cultivating alternative cultures with their own exclusive communication spaces. Similar to Israeli Arabs, they live outside the consensus of serving in the army, despite formally being Israeli citizens. Another group of Jews within Israel, also religious, yet axiomatically distinct from the ultra-orthodox - religious nationalists - stand out from other groups by being perhaps the only group that unconflictedly supports the ongoing war in which Israel finds itself, by being the only group whose members seemingly have no difficulty with the meaning and consequences of this war. All these inter-group differences and cross-border similarities engender differences in rights and responsibilities, blur the boundaries that define and differentiate groups, and prevent Israelis from building an unequivocal collective identity and an unreserved feeling of unambiguous identification.

In a similar vein, Zionism produced a major temporal discontinuity and an ambiguous and revisionist attitude toward the past history of the Jewish people. The effective break from Zionist axioms has further muddled our collective memory, to the point where, today, no single, agreed upon interpretation exists regarding any given aspect or episode in our history. There is no widely accepted verdict - whether Israel is an extension of Jewish history in the diaspora, a rebellion against that history, a breaking away from it, an episode within it, or a temporary and experimental disruption along the continuing path from the past to some indeterminate future, unmarked even within our own imagination. The perceived temporal continuity that seemed so obvious in our society's modern period - from an insufferable past, through an arduous but promising present, to bright and shining future - has shattered into innumerable scattered and unconnected pieces. Given the sudden appearance of unimagined and unchecked horrors in our past, who can truly envision the future towards which we are headed, or what surprises that future holds for us? Our future is still unimagined, unbounded and unmarked, not only because it is so difficult to foresee, but also because it is still unclear towards which future we aspire to head. This all means that our concept of time is unbounded.

Geographically, as well, Israel - since The Six-Day War - has been open, unsignified and unbounded. This was obviously true before the Oslo Agreement, but now all the more so. Israeli citizens have no idea how far they can travel safely or even legally; the Israeli government does not know for certain where it has the right to send its soldiers. It is equally unclear where the borders of the legal system fall, dividing between laws for Jews and laws for Arabs. At the intersection of law and land, it remains uncertain which territories Israel has annexed *de jure*, that it has annexed *de facto*, and which it holds only temporarily.

The confusion over borders on the geographical map only adds to the confusion over borders on each individual Israeli's personal cognitive map. This, then, is the third defining feature of Israel's postmodern experience: the absence of signified boundaries surrounding the social collective, the time and the territory within which Israelis live.

The fourth defining feature lies in the breakdown of values. This feature derives from the first three. When reality cannot be understood in rational terms of cause and effect, it becomes difficult to attribute values - more appropriate or less appropriate - to different episodes, given that reality itself eludes understanding. Without an all-encompassing world view, from which the basic principles that give meaning to the processes and events of daily life are derived, it is difficult to shape and subsequently to adopt a universal moral code, for it is solely the basic principles of a broad world view that allow a society to formulate a moral code. The absence of boundaries on time and space incurs a deficiency of rules and limits that make moral judgment possible, and hence, anything - and everything - goes. Without moral judgment, no moral injustices exist for us - either as victims or as perpetrators - that cannot be justified instead of condemned. No transcendent societal values rise to the pinnacle of some hierarchy of values, and none fall to its base.

Sinking into a situation of 'anything goes' - including acts that were formerly considered to be morally impermissible - brings with it a desperate search for an oasis of rationality, a reality with suitable and effective punishment, with threat that underlies deterrence. Despite, or perhaps due to, the realization stated earlier that the struggle against terrorism offers neither victory nor defeat, that every attempt to limit terrorism leads to its expansion, we are increasingly willing to try ever more contemptible means to defeat terrorism, in the feeble hope that this time it will work. We began with the selective execution, without trial, of terrorists considered to be time bombs ready to explode; we expanded the list of targets to all leaders of terrorist organizations; we later tried closing off entire cities, denying residents subsistence and embittering their lives. Now, in the desperate search for deterrence, we try other forms of collective punishment, such as penalizing the families of suicidal killers. Although we offer explanations for our actions shrouded in the appearance of retribution as effective deterrence, it is only appearance, and not actuality, for these terrorist crimes have been neither lessened nor restrained after all these punitive steps we have taken. Tossed about by waves on a sea of meaninglessness, we see no safe haven ahead, no solid rational ground on which punishment actually serves as an effective deterrent. No means is proscribed, for the concept, 'proscribed' has no meaning in a system completely devoid of clear values.

What remains to be done in a postmodern situation such as Israel's today? Nothing - for the very nature of the situation is that nothing can be done. One may observe, exercise caution, lament, grieve, fume and boil with rage. Even residents of peaceful, untroubled nations do nothing. They merely watch, somewhat amused, smiling, ultimately sighing in resignation, bored at last. As for us - how long will we continue to do nothing? The answer appears to be, until both benighted peoples in our land finish killing each other off completely, or until - suddenly, finally - both peoples are granted the wisdom they so utterly lack.