

# **The Balance of Israel' National Security s**

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## **Overcoming Fatalism in Israel**

**- Working Paper -**

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**Overcoming Fatalism in Israel**

## By Dr. Herbert London

If there is one overarching issue facing Israel today it is overcoming fatalism. To suggest that Israel faces dangers is to restate the obvious. Everyone in this nation lives with the fear of weapons of mass destruction; everyone in Israel has experienced the horror of war and everyone has heard threatening sounds from the Arab world.

To a remarkable degree Israel has maintained its composure in an environment where others might have been hysterical. It is one thing to live in fear, quite another to stare it down.

This was not a given at the moment of creation. Regardless of one's view of David Ben Gurion, his central role in the creation of this nation, in my opinion, was overcoming fatalism. Consider the realities of 1948. Israel had very limited military assets. The strains of pacifism coruscated through the national consciousness, an understandable reaction to the bloodshed of the war. Jews had placed a greater emphasis on intellectual rather than physical prowess. Utopian socialism had many stalwarts in this newly formed state who thought of war solely as class conflict. And the memory of the Holocaust was embedded in the thoughts of every Israeli. This was the backdrop as Ben Gurion urged the nation to fight for its survival.

While conditions are certainly different from the forties, overcoming fatalism, the need to sustain national esprit with tocsin in the air, is yet again an overarching national concern.

Writing in the 1950's Pitirim Sorokin argued that, "A fairly uniform symptom of disintegration in my great supersystem of culture is the substitution of quantitative colossalism for a sublime quality; of glittering externality for inner value; of a show for a substance. So it was in the past, and so it is at the present."

The Greek civilization of the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries, for example, was modest, yet sublime. Even the Parthenon was of relatively

modest size compared to the temples that followed in later Hellenic and Roman periods. The Colossus of Rhodes was 105 feet tall and the Halicarnassus Mausoleum 140 feet high.

Yet quantitative colossalism was not a substitute for qualitative values. As Pliny the Elder noted, "Not being able to make them beautiful, they made them rich." The bigger the temple, the more hollow the religion. The larger the empire, the more disorganized it became. Technique replaced inspiration; mechanical skill replaced creative originality.

Surely the feverish tempo of accelerated change which is part and parcel of contemporary life tends to exclude the creation of lasting values. Yet Israel - while a quintessentially modern state - is rooted in the ancient; its ambient air is biblical and its very soil retains the footprints of Jacob, Isaac and Jesus. If ever there was a land that embodies the ebb and flow of history, Israel is it.

Here is the challenge for a nation that has only known challenges: retain a vision of the nation that upholds its heritage and is capable of defending its present. This is a glib reminder that Israel holds the keys to civilization, for Jerusalem as a fact and a symbol opens the door to the principles of western civilization. Should it fall, civilization will never be the same. Israel has a unique obligation to reject superannuated pseudo values. It fights for the enthronement of the best that has been thought and written, including, but not restricted to, scripture. This is the inspirational dimension for a nation that needs inspiration to survive.

Israel's historic test is a test of wills. The formula of crisis - ordeal - catharsis - charisma - resurrection applies to Israel today as it did 2000 years ago. There is little doubt that that the ordeals of the moment - the bloodshed and threats - have led to catharsis, a national social searching that has resulted in philosophical solidarity, if not political unity.

I do not believe that the lessons of life and death are lasting. If that were so causal relationships and consequences wouldn't be so readily repeated in history. In the field of experience mankind is virtually

unteachable. He must live through the anguish in order to discover enlightenment. Life is alpha and omega; the cosmic flow taking microcosmic forms.

World history is a world court in which the stronger, the fuller, the more self assured are found triumphant. That notion suggests Israeli power – military and cultural – cannot be overthrown unless that power wanes and another force subdues it. Hence the very concept of overcoming fatalism translates into the maintenance of superior military strength and a culture that recognizes and supports the values and independence of the Israeli nation.

Since the former is a given in the national equation, let me speak to the latter in terms that give traction to cultural vitality. Emerging in Israel is the seed of a new resigned piety – even among those who call themselves “secular Jews.” It springs from a tortured conscience, from the trials of the moment, from spiritual hunger and from the legacy of the past.

Those with a tortured conscience – the pacifist who can no longer justify turning the other cheek or the accommodatist who is baffled by rejection – ask new and different questions about their nation and themselves.

Those suffering under the yoke of terrorism wonder when the enemy will relent and when God will grant tranquility to a land rife with conflict.

Those who sought solace in sensual pleasure ask plaintively if there is more to life than immediate gratification.

And those who rarely considered the purpose of this Jewish state have been asked to find strength from the legacy of Judah Maccabee and the defenders of Israel who defied the odds against them and prevailed.

In order to sustain cultural vitality – the key ingredient is national esprit – a tradition must be created so that the efforts of the past can be continued with the pulse and spirit of the original leaders. The continuation of a great tradition does not require a great leader; it breeds commitment in many quarters. It transcends politics and it elevates civic mindedness.

While democracies do not usually engender a display of honor – a concept fraught with ambiguity – honor gives value and dignity to sacrifice. To be bereft of honor is to be annulled by history. Each person may have his own binding notion of honor, loyalty and courage which in the aggregate accounts for civic pride. It is precisely this sense of honor, however conveyed, that must be transmitted to the young so that an ethic can be imbibed which gives energy to nationhood. In some sense, it doesn't matter if national mythology is true, albeit that helps, but it must be believed, bred into the very marrow of the state.

To the extent that revisionists refute the glory of the nation's history, they sap the strength of resistance. History need not be an expression of false nobility, but it must emphasize the positive traits of a nation that result in symbolic dignity. There must be something to believe in that goes beyond mere material comforts.

For a young nation like Israel life is bound up with the soil and the history of the Holocaust. Consensus – to the extent it existed in this newly formed nation – was cemented by a wholly unconscious, metaphysical impulse. That impulse was and remains the nexus between Moses and his wandering for the Promised Land and the Jews whose post war peregrinations took them to Israel for asylum.

Culture is not synonymous with religion. Israel may be a Jewish state but its culture, including art, science, and intellect arises from a separate if parallel route. But that too is embedded in the state as a source of pride and national fulfillment. The student of the state should familiarize himself with those cultural manifestations that emerge uniquely from Israeli life. "I believe" are the two words that serve as the most effective shield against fear, but these are words that must be learned.

The nation of Israel represents the "we" of its people. This is not merely a feeling of unity among disparate people; underlying the nation is an idea, a stream of collective consciousness, a destiny. Through collective

action, Jews created the people of Israel. That sense of the past, yiskah, should not be forgotten; it is the key that unlocks united action.

In contrast to traditional principles of self discipline, the pursuit of truth, honor and national glory, Israel also must contend with the values of radical egalitarianism and hedonism. These values rest on sensation, not reason. They reflect a sector of society that is suspicious of distinction and relies on government to make people happy. In the contest of ideas this segment of the population will not prevail. Yet it is a challenge. A rich nation produces indulgences that enervate the soul and undermine unity. It is necessary to recall that the external trappings of power did not save many empires from collapse.

Israel must guard against its indulgences and simultaneously inspire a learning of its past glory and unique accomplishments. It cannot allow itself to be deflated from without or weakened from within.

Invariably discussion on foreign policy considers military advantages, deterrent effects and the size and lethality of arsenals. Nations, however, survive for many reasons, not the least of which is civic pride – a belief that the nation and the ideas that gave it life is worth defending, and if events call for it, even sacrificing life itself.

Israel, as an idea, lives in the imagination of each of its citizens and every Jew worldwide. That in itself should be a sufficient reason for overcoming fatalism. But in the sight of mangled bodies and blood on the streets, idealism is a far away impulse. That explains why reminders of the past, ancestral memories, must be recalled. “I believe” is the armor against despair. These two words are built into the psyche of the nation and during a period of grieving and concern for the future they are worth repeating and repeating again and again.

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