

60 Years



We can celebrate many things on this 60th anniversary of the founding of the modern day State of Israel. There is much to be thankful for. There is much that we have achieved. Israel has been the source of many innovations in the areas of water management and agriculture, science, medicine and technology. The country enjoys its own form of democracy and for many of its citizens it has created economic prosperity with an open and dynamic economy.

The fact that the state of Israel even exists, after thousands of years of Jewish statelessness, is one of the most unique and complex events in modern history. There remains much to be done to build a truly fair and inclusive society: reaching out to Israeli Arabs, fighting corruption among Israel's political elite and raising huge numbers of citizens out of poverty. Nonetheless, this is a moment when Israeli Jews, along with the Diaspora Jews who have participated in the Israel venture, can reflect with satisfaction on the many positive accomplishments.

But in one area we have failed miserably and we cannot hide from that fact even on such an occasion. Especially not on such an occasion. I believe our 60th anniversary demands a deeper and more sober type of celebration – one that is characterized more by introspection and soul searching than by jingoistic displays of fireworks, anthems and military air and naval shows.

On our 60th anniversary, our relations with the Palestinians have fallen to one of the lowest points ever. On our 60th anniversary, the shared hopes for a just and peaceful solution to our conflict with our neighbors have rarely been dimmer. On our 60th anniversary, our responsibility to create a hopeful and secure future for our children and grandchildren has never seemed so abandoned. On our 60th anniversary our Arab citizens feel as disenfranchised as ever from what is as much their state as ours.

My instinct is to ask how we have come so far in seeing things deteriorate so badly. But the truth is better served by that famous French saying – plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose – the more things change the more they stay the same. Our greatest failing, and it is one of great moral and practical consequence, is that in 60 years of statehood and 110 years of Zionism, we have not honestly grappled with our relationship with those who lived in what we came to claim as our homeland.

On one end of the scale were people like Ahad Ha'Am who in 1891 wrote in one of his important booklets, "Truth about Palestine":

We who live abroad are accustomed to believe that almost all Eretz Yisrael is now uninhabited desert and whoever wishes can buy land there as he pleases. But this is not true. It is very difficult to find in the land cultivated fields that are not used for planting...

We who live abroad are accustomed to believing that the Arabs are all wild desert people who, like donkeys, neither see nor understand what is happening around them. But this is a grave mistake... But, if the time comes that our people's life in Eretz Yisrael will develop to a point where we are taking their place, either slightly or significantly, the natives are not going to just step aside so easily...

Consider the writings of Yitzhak Epstein, a Russian Zionist living in Palestine, who wrote in his 1907 essay entitled "A Hidden Question":

Among the difficult questions connected with the idea of resurrecting our people on its land is one question that stands clearly against them all: the question of our relations with the Arabs. This question, on whose correct resolution hangs the rebirth of our national hope, has not been forgotten, but rather has vanished entirely from among the Zionists and in its true form it is almost never mentioned in the literature of our movement...

But let us leave justice and sentimentality for a moment, and look at the question from the standpoint of ability alone. Will they be silent in the face of dispossessions, calmly accepting what we do to them? Will they not ultimately awaken to restore by force what was stripped from them by gold!

In 1914, Moshe Sharett, aid to Ben-Gurion and later Israel's first foreign minister and second prime minister, wrote:

We have forgotten that we have not come to an empty land to inherit it, but we have come to conquer a country from a people inhabiting it, that governs it by virtue of its language and savage culture... for if we cease to look upon our land, the Land of Israel, as ours alone and we allow a partner into our estate- all content and meaning will be lost to our enterprise. (Benny Morris, Righteous Victims, pg 91).

Read what Ze'ev Jabotinsky wrote in 'The Iron Wall' (We and the Arabs) in 1923:

That the Arabs of the Land of Israel should willingly come to an agreement with us is beyond all hopes and dreams at present, and in the foreseeable future... Apart from those who have been virtually "blind" since childhood, all the other moderate Zionists have long since understood that there is not even the slightest hope of ever obtaining the agreement of the Arabs of the Land of Israel to "Palestine" becoming a country with a Jewish majority...

Every reader has some idea of the early history of other countries which have been settled. I suggest that he recall all known instances. If he should attempt to seek but one instance of a country settled with the consent of those born there he will not succeed... Zionist colonization, even the most restricted, must either be terminated or carried out in defiance of the will of the native population. This colonization can, therefore, continue and develop only under the protection of a force independent of the local population – an iron wall which the native population cannot break through. This is, in toto, our policy towards the Arabs. To formulate it any other way would only be hypocrisy...

And finally, we have the view of one Judah Magnes, an American reform rabbi who moved to Palestine in 1922 and served as the first chancellor and president of Hebrew University from 1925 until his death in 1948. In 1929, Chaim Weizmann asked Magnes to provide his view of the riots in Palestine in which 133 Jews and 116 Arabs were killed:

Dear Dr. Weizmann, You asked me over the telephone last night to write you my views on the present situation... I think that the time has come when the Jewish policy as to Palestine must be very clear, and that now only one of two policies is possible. Either the logical policy outlined by Jabotinsky in a letter in the Times which came today, basing our Jewish life in Palestine on militarism and imperialism; or a pacific policy that treats as entirely secondary such things as a "Jewish State" or a Jewish majority, or even "The Jewish National Home..."

It is time that we came down to realities. We have passed resolutions concerning cooperation with the Arabs, but we have done very little seriously to carry them out. I do not say that this is easy of achievement nor do I absolutely know that it is possible... this policy of cooperation is certainly more possible and more hopeful of achievement than building up a Jewish Home (National or otherwise) on bayonets and oppression...

The attitudes amongst Zionist leaders and settlers towards the Palestinians were from the start conflicted and ambivalent. Although the historical narrative I learned in Hebrew school and Jewish and Zionist youth groups reflected little of that internal conflict and ambivalence, it has always been with us.

As I read Ahad Ha'am, Yitzhak Epstein, Moshe Sharett, Jabotinsky and Magnes I am awe-struck by the fact that everything they spoke of has come to pass. We always knew the 'Arab question' was in many ways going to be the defining measure of Zionism's success or failure and, at best, we largely chose to ignore it. And at worst, we often didn't care.

I am disheartened to see that we appear to have have traveled a path, after all the warnings and internal debates among the very earliest Zionists, that seems to reflect something Lord Balfour wrote in 1919: "Zionism, be it right or wrong, good or bad, is rooted in age-old traditions, in present needs, in future hopes, of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now inhabit that ancient land." (Morris; pg 76).

And here we are, in 2008, on the 60th anniversary of our independence, and on the most fundamental question of our national revival we have failed to progress beyond the insights and opinions of Zionism's forefathers dating back more than 100 years.

We are living and maintaining a narrative that is blinding us to what could be a liberating truth. We have returned to a land of two peoples and along the way we somehow convinced ourselves that it was only about us, about our needs and about our pain. It's time to be straight with ourselves. The success of a Jewish homeland or a homeland for the Jews was from the start, and more importantly remains today, inexorably tied to the future of the Palestinians.

On our 60th anniversary we enjoy freedom, prosperity, opportunity and self-determination, while the Palestinians have none of those things. We must no longer run from the fact that our success has in the end been in many ways at someone else's expense. We can no longer make believe that we didn't see today's situation coming. We can no longer maintain that it's all their fault.

That our forefathers chose to see Zionism as a zero-sum game of national movements – only one can win and therefore one must lose – may have been understandable in the context of its time. That we are stuck in that thinking is inexcusable and no longer acceptable today.

On this 60th anniversary we urgently need new ways to look forward to a shared future with the Palestinians; not a future we begrudgingly grant each other but a future that reconciles our conflicted past and embraces our future potential.

To truly look forward we must first look inward. Then we must look into each other's eyes. Maybe then, we can turn our gaze, together, to the future.

I am not one generally given to prayer, but on this 60th Yom Hatzmaut and the Palestinians' 60th Al Naqba I pray to God that on our 120th anniversary, our grandchildren and great grandchildren will be celebrating the 60th anniversary of a new beginning and a new future.