

Jews and the Challenge of Sovereignty

Michael B. Oren

Over the past few years, as the Israeli army has become the world's foremost anti-terrorist fighting force, great numbers of American servicemen and servicewomen have come to Israel to learn from our experience and to apply it in America's own war on terror. It has been my privilege to host many of these officers at my home in Jerusalem—people from Oklahoma and Arkansas and other exotic places, individuals with no prior experience in the Middle East. It is always fascinating to hear their impressions of the area and their analyses of both the conflicts in the Middle East and the nature of Middle Eastern societies.

Invariably they home in on one characteristic—the refusal of many Arab leaders, whether they be Palestinians, Iraqis, Saudis, or Syrians, to take responsibility for their own failures and foibles. Whenever something goes wrong in Arab societies, these Americans observe, it is never these societies' fault, but instead the fault of the United States or the West or, most commonly, of Israel and the Jews. And this refusal to accept responsibility is the largest single obstacle to America's efforts to foster democracy in the Middle East—so these officers tell me—because the essence of democracy, of sovereignty and freedom, is the willingness to take responsibility for one's actions and decisions.

Lecture delivered at the Shalem Center/Birthright Institute conference in Tarrytown, New York, in December 2003.

I listen to them, and I cannot help but agree, but I also cannot help wondering whether Israelis and Jews don't face similar difficulties in shouldering the burdens of statehood. Inevitably, I find myself thinking back to the eve of Israel's independence, to May 14, 1948, when one man had to grapple with the question of whether the Jews, after generations of powerlessness, could learn to act as sovereigns in their own state—whether they could live up to the challenges of independence.

That man was the leader of the Zionist movement, the soon-to-be prime minister, David Ben-Gurion. On that day, Ben-Gurion sat in his living room and watched while outside in the street, the Jews of Palestine were dancing. They were dancing because they were about to realize what was one of the most remarkable and inspiring achievements in human history: A people which had been exiled from its homeland two thousand years before, which had endured countless pogroms, expulsions, and persecutions, but which had refused to relinquish its identity—which had, on the contrary, substantially strengthened that identity; a people which only a few years before had been the victim of mankind's largest single act of mass murder, killing a third of the world's Jews, that people was returning home as sovereign citizens in their own independent state.

And so they danced, filling the streets; but Ben-Gurion wasn't dancing. Instead he sat alone and wrote in his diary about his fears, confiding doubts about the Jews' ability to withstand the onslaught of the combined Arab armies, and about the world's willingness to accept a permanent Jewish state. He wondered whether the Zionist vision of a normal state, a state like all others, could be reconciled with a Jewish state that aspired to be a light unto the nations. Most disconcertingly, he questioned whether a people so long accustomed to being the victims of sovereign power could suddenly turn around and judiciously wield it—whether they could, in fact, take responsibility for themselves.

Formerly David Green, Ben-Gurion, like many Zionist leaders of his generation—Levi Eshkol, Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan—had Hebraized his

name in order to establish a direct link between the dynamic Zionist present and Israel's heroic past, skipping over the millennia of Jewish powerlessness. Yet he knew that such leapfrogging was not really possible. The Jews, Ben-Gurion knew, had problems with power.

Those problems are already discernible in the Bible—with the serious reservations regarding kingship raised by the Prophets, and with the unstable and often violent relationships between monarchs and priests during the period of the Temples. The problems multiplied a thousandfold, however, with the destruction of the Second Temple and the annihilation of the Jewish commonwealth in biblical Israel.

Shorn of sovereignty, the Jews developed a cult of powerlessness, which many deemed a form of divine punishment for their sins and which developed, in time, into an actual *repugnance* toward power. If the Bible was clear about whom it considered the hero—Joshua conquering Canaanite cities, Gideon smiting Midianites, Samson wielding a jawbone like an axe—the Talmud, written mostly by Jews lacking sovereign political power, was far less categorical. “Who is the hero?” asks the Mishna. Not King David dancing as he escorts the ark to liberated Jerusalem, not Judah Maccabee and the Hasmonians defeating the Greeks and rededicating the Temple; no, the hero is “the man who conquers his own passions.” Losing sovereignty, the Jews fled inward from the fields of politics and battle—into their communities, into their synagogues, and into themselves.

To be sure, this retreat had its ameliorative rewards, enabling Jews to attain a heightened sense of spirituality and morality. But doing so came at the price of increasing alienation from temporal matters—from responsibility for themselves not only as individuals but also as a nation. True, Jews might provide shelter to banished co-religionists, or pay their ransoms—“*kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*—all Jews are responsible for one another,” the famous rabbinic teaching has it—but how often did those Jews build a city

and elect officials to govern it? How often could they, or would they, make the most basic sovereign decision to defend themselves? In much of rabbinic thinking, political power is profane, mundane, and dangerous. May God bless and keep the czar far away from us, Tevye prays.

In its most extreme form, the Jewish revulsion *towards* power becomes a total prohibition *of* power, and any attempted exercise of sovereignty becomes in effect a challenge to God's omnipotence—in other words, blasphemy. Blasphemy, desecration, *hilul*, are precisely the words applied by parts of the ultra-Orthodox Haredi world to Zionism, which in its view is an abominable attempt to arrogate God's exclusive purview—to end Jewish exile and reinvest the Jewish people with power. Even Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the most influential figure in religious Zionism, questioned whether Jews could or should act as wolves, for states, Kook said, were by nature wolf-like.

In modernity, however, the ever-inventive Jewish people came up with another answer to the problem of power: Not turning inward, but—as soon as the Emancipation and the fall of the ghetto walls allowed it—by bursting out through assimilation. Thus, beginning in the nineteenth century, Jews could become powerful—they could become a Benjamin Disraeli or a Ferdinand Lasalle—but as Englishmen and Germans, not as Jews; in spite of their Jewishness, and usually at its expense.

It has often been remarked that perhaps the one thing ultra-Orthodox and assimilated Jews agreed upon early in the last century was a staunch opposition to Zionism: The Orthodox because it claimed that Zionism aspired to play God and redeem the Jewish nation; the highly assimilated Jews because they denied that the Jews were a nation at all. Ultra-Orthodox and assimilated Jews would reunite tragically on the train to Auschwitz, the final destination on the 2,000-year-long path of Jewish powerlessness. The Nazis sent them there claiming, paradoxically, that Jews wielded too much power.

Though American Jewry would later explain the Holocaust as the product of an absence of toleration and universal values, the Zionist interpretation of the Holocaust has always been that six million Jews died because they lacked an army, a state—power.

But for the 600,000 Jews in Israel in 1948, facing six Arab armies preparing to invade the nascent state, the question of whether Jewish power was necessary was moot. Without power, the citizens of the new state would die—not only spiritually, but physically.

Yet, as Ben-Gurion realized, knowing this and acting on it were not synonymous. He understood that the transformation from a people recoiling from power to a people capable of embracing it would be the single greatest challenge facing Israel. “We must adopt a new approach, new habits of mind,” he told listeners shortly before the state’s founding. “We must learn to think like a state.”

He even coined a Hebrew word for that challenge, *mamlachtiyut*, a neologism which eludes English equivalents but which roughly translates as “acting in a sovereign-like manner.” By *mamlachtiyut*, Ben-Gurion meant the Jews’ ability to handle power—military power as well as democratic and political power—effectively, justly, responsibly. The Jews of Israel, Ben-Gurion knew, might succeed in repelling Arab armies, in absorbing many times their number of new immigrants, and in creating world-class governmental and cultural institutions, but without *mamlachtiyut*, without the ability to deal with power and take responsibility for its ramifications, they could not ultimately survive.

The newborn state did in fact repel the invaders and establish its independence. Yet not all of the threats to Israel’s existence emanated from the Arabs. In the summer of 1948, at the height of the fighting, Ben-Gurion faced a challenge from the Revisionist Zionists, led by Menachem Begin, who balked at following orders from the provisional authorities. Ben-Gurion told Begin that a sovereign state has one government and one army, and when Begin tried to bring a ship, the *Altalena*, into Israel bearing arms for his

own militia, Ben-Gurion ordered the vessel sunk. Later, Ben-Gurion would also meet a challenge to his democratically endowed authority from the Left, from the kibbutz-based military force known as the Palmah, which he ordered disbanded.

Israel had established its independence, but some of the greatest challenges to its sovereignty lay ahead. In 1956, Ben-Gurion demonstrated what he meant by *mamlachtiyut* by going to war against Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Soviet-supplied army. The decision was roundly condemned by most of the world, including by the United States, but Ben-Gurion's position was that no state, and certainly not the Jewish state, was obliged to sit idly while an army sworn to its destruction massed on its borders.

Ben-Gurion also exercised *mamlachtiyut* by building what became the greatest physical manifestation of Jewish power ever, the Dimona nuclear facility. Just over a decade after Jews were herded by the millions into Nazi death camps, an independent Jewish state possessed the power enjoyed by only a handful of nations.

Yet, for all its successful displays of *mamlachtiyut*, Israel sometimes displayed a frightening inability to understand the rudiments of sovereignty. In May 1967, for example, while Nasser's troops again gathered on Israel's border, Israel's leadership was torn between the generals who wanted to go to war immediately, and the ministers, who insisted on first proving—to the United States, especially—that Israel had done everything possible to avoid bloodshed. The ministers won out, and in June 1967 Israel defeated at least three major Arab armies, almost quadrupling its territorial size.

But the Six Day victory precipitated a different kind of power complex in Israel—an over-reliance on tanks and planes and paratroopers, a fetishizing of the Israel Defense Forces, and the near apotheosis of its generals. The edifice would come crashing down, suddenly, at 2 p.m. on October 6, 1973, when the armies of Egypt and Syria simultaneously attacked Israel, catching

it off guard and killing 2,600 of its soldiers. Though the IDF managed to turn the tide and to achieve a stunning victory which would in time pacify Israel's two most threatening borders, the shock of that initial attack would remain a national nightmare. Come Yom Kippur time every year—and this year was no exception—much of the country engages in a paroxysm of pain and an all-out assault on the very notion of power. Since 1973, virtually every Israeli resort to armed force—the 1976 Entebbe raid and the 1981 attack on the Osirak nuclear reactor in Iraq are notable exceptions—has been the focus of profound controversy not only in the world, but more keenly, within Israel itself.

The Yom Kippur trauma would give rise to two new, mutually incompatible movements: First, Shalom Achshav (Peace Now), a leftist organization, recoiled from an overreliance on power and instead sought a mediated solution in which Israeli sovereignty would dissolve into a borderless New Middle East—essentially the old assimilationist vision revisited. Second, Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful), championed by parts of the Right and many religious settlers of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, revered power as the panacea for Israel's security problems. These are the poles between which Israel has been torn for the last thirty years, and the dividing issue is not race or economics, but power.

It goes without saying that this struggle does not occur in a vacuum. Israel is situated in the midst of the Arab world, in the historic Islamic heartland, a region that also has a problem with power, but one that is diametrically opposed to Israel's. Unlike normative Judaism, a product of powerlessness, Islam developed during a period when Muslims ruled most of the civilized world. Power is integral to Islam. There is no medieval manual on how to run a Jewish state, but thousands of such texts exist on how to run an Islamic state. Islam, therefore, harbors no misgivings regarding power. It is the tool by which God fulfills his will for the world, and, as such, the attainment of power is incumbent on every individual Muslim.

Arab Muslims thus have a problem with a palpably powerful Jewish state, and in recent years they hit upon the ideal solution. Terrorism not only requires little by way of technical sophistication or capital outlays, but by forcing Israel to fight back in densely populated areas, imposing roadblocks and curfews. By drawing international wrath toward Israeli policies, it thrusts to the fore the deepest Jewish ambivalence toward power. Though it patently failed in its goal of destroying Israel's economy and unraveling its civil society, terror did succeed in exacerbating the Jewish confusion over sovereignty, over *mamlachtiyut*.

Part of the Israeli population, for example, reacted by building unauthorized settlements in the territories—essentially subverting the democratic process—while another part tried to negotiate a European-funded peace treaty with Palestinian officials behind the Israeli government's back. Some Israelis wanted to drive the Palestinians out entirely—an extreme abuse of power—while others advocated the creation of a binational state—the final abdication of power. Both are classic examples of what Ben-Gurion would call a breakdown of *mamlachtiyut*.

M*amlachtiyut*, in fact, was what drew me to Israel in the first place. I grew up just about the only Jewish kid on the block, and the almost daily trouncing I took from the neighborhood gang taught me a great deal about power and the hazards of lacking it.

But what really convinced me was a coin. I was a fanatical numismatic, collecting coins from around the world. I was especially keen on ancient Jewish coins of the Second Temple period. One day—I must have been about nine—a distant cousin of mine from Israel gave me a coin that was an exact replica of a Second Temple coin, only it wasn't ancient. It was shiny and clean and the letters emblazoned on it were identical to those I was just then learning in Hebrew school. Though not a particularly precocious nine-year-old, I knew that modern coins came from existing countries and

Hebrew from Jews and quickly completed the syllogism: There was a Jewish state. From that epiphanous moment on, I was hooked.

There followed the Six Day War—the only event in history in which Jews have been powerful and appreciated for it. I was fascinated by the notion of Jews taking responsibility for themselves as Jews—for their taxes and their sewers and their lampposts. My Zionism was less Herzlian than Schwartzian—as in the beat generation poet Delmore Schwartz. If Herzl said, “If you will it, it is no dream,” then Schwartz said (as the title of his 1937 short story put it), “In dreams begin responsibilities.” I wanted the responsibility.

So I moved to Israel, became a citizen, and joined the army. I put on those red paratrooper boots the first time and was overwhelmed by the realization that I was a member of the first Jewish fighting force in 2,000 years, a Jew from New Jersey lucky enough to live at a time when I could serve a sovereign Jewish state.

What a privilege—and what a responsibility. Its weight became apparent to me fighting in Lebanon and in the territories. It also became clear later, when I had removed those boots and, a civilian again, was working for the government at a time when its prime minister was, in a despicable misuse of power and an egregious failure of *mamlachtiyut*, assassinated.

Today, as an Israeli, I must confront questions that derive from having power. I had to decide, for instance, whether to support the construction of a fence which may provide greater security against terrorist attacks, but which evokes the very ghetto walls that Zionism aspired to topple. During the last two years, when two of my children were serving in the IDF—one of whom was wounded in action fighting against Hamas in Hebron—I had to decide whether to favor a pullout of Israeli forces from Palestinian cities and perhaps give a jump-start to peace, or whether, by doing so, I'd be giving encouragement to terror, jeopardizing my third child, who took a bus to and from school every day in Jerusalem. Last August, when I, together with a group of Israeli officers, broke into a synagogue in a Jewish settlement in

Gaza and confronted a hundred men, women, and children lying on the floor, wailing and screaming out to God, I had to decide whether evicting these people from that synagogue and from their homes would strengthen the Israeli state or shatter the Israeli people. There was no escaping that decision; the responsibility was mine.

An American journalist once asked me to react to a charge made by a settler leader to the effect that the problem with the IDF is that it is a Western army, and not a biblical army, capable of exacting eye-for-an-eye revenge. The problem with the IDF, I replied, is that it is not Western enough. I said that the Palestinians should thank Allah daily that they are grappling with roadblocks and curfews, and not, say, with the American or French armies, which would have pulverized their cities long ago. The problem with the IDF, I said, is that it is too Jewish.

I remembered that when Lebanese Christian militiamen, sent by Defense Minister Ariel Sharon into the refugee camps of Beirut, killed 800 Palestinians, hundreds of thousands of Israelis took to the streets to protest Sharon's action. But in 2002, when President Bush sent the Northern Alliance into Taliban villages in Afghanistan, killing many thousands, scarcely an American voice rose in protest. I recalled that when U.S. forces believed that Saddam Hussein was hiding in a certain neighborhood in Baghdad, U.S. planes flattened the neighborhood, but that when the IDF learned that the entire leadership of Hamas was in a single building in Gaza, it chose a bomb too small to eliminate them for fear of harming nearby civilians.

Israeli soldiers go into the homes of terror suspects, risking their own lives and often sacrificing them in order to reduce civilian casualties, where another army might simply call in an air strike or an artillery barrage. Israel devotes but a single day each year to acknowledging its army—not an armed forces day, or flag day, or veterans' day—but Yom Hazikaron, Memorial Day, a day commemorated not with military parades and old men

in uniform, but with songs and poems about the horrors of war and the holiness of peace. Here is a country that has been in the throes of a vicious war for more than four years—a war in which Israel has suffered as many casualties, per capita, as the United States in Vietnam—but which has yet to give that war a name.

I srael today faces challenges every bit as existential as those Ben-Gurion confronted in 1948. Terrorists still try to blow themselves up in public places within Israel, and vast forces, many armed with long-range missiles and unconventional weapons, assemble around it. As evidenced recently by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's call for Israel to be "wiped off the map," many of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims would not weep over the disappearance of the Jewish state, nor would they be too selective with respect to the manner in which that elimination would be implemented. Many Western Europeans, meanwhile, are indifferent and even hostile to Israel's fate. And even in America—in its universities in particular—Israel is increasingly vilified, delegitimized, and branded an anachronism at best, and a fascist regime at worst.

Yet, in spite of the immense forces arrayed against it, Israel has not only stood up to the test of power. Far more than that, it has presented to the world a model of balance between the requirements of justice and morality and the requisites of power. The IDF is generally regarded as one of the strongest and most sophisticated armies in the world, yet it does not use even a fraction of its potential strength against the people who, if *they* held such power, would hesitate not a moment to direct it at Israel's destruction. Israel does not evict a people that threatens its existence—and the last century is rife with such expulsions, especially in the West—but rather offers that people an opportunity to live with it side by side, even offering large parts of its own historical and spiritual homeland.

Israel's soldiers go into battle armed not only with guns and grenades but with pocket-size, laminated cards containing the IDF code of ethics,

which reminds them that it is their solemn duty to make every effort to avoid causing civilian casualties and to use their weapons solely for the purposes of self- and national defense. Israelis fight, asking themselves at every stage whether in fact they are doing the right thing, the moral thing, the Jewish thing. Classical Judaism may not provide us with a detailed model of what a Jewish state should look like, but Israel has provided the world with a model of how a state threatened with terror and missiles and the hatred of millions can act justly.

The model is, admittedly, incomplete—a work in progress. We in Israel will continue to debate what acts are and are not permissible for the Jewish state to take in order to assure its survival, and to discuss the requirements of *mamlachtiyut*.

Our responsibility today is to prove to ourselves, and the world, that the phrase “Jewish state” is not in fact a contradiction in terms. Let us remain cognizant not only of our great achievements—the Nobel Prizes our scientists are awarded or the European championships our basketball players win—but also of the weighty responsibilities we bear: The responsibilities of reconciling our heritage with our sovereignty, our strength with our compassion, and our will to survive with our desire to inspire others.

Michael B. Oren is a Senior Fellow at the Shalem Center and a Contributing Editor to AZURE. He is the author of Six Days of War (Oxford, 2003). His last contribution to AZURE was “Save the Citizens’ Army” (AZURE 19, Winter 2005).