
Eliot A. Cohen

Israel at fifty is wrestling with its myths. A band of so-called “new historians” have challenged the consensus history of Israel’s struggle with the Arabs of Palestine in the 1940s and the Arab states thereafter. Some of these farouche intellectuals have recast the pre-1948 Jewish community in light of the powerful state that is all they have known, exaggerating Israel’s prospects for peace during and after independence. Indeed, some of the new historians seem to doubt Israel’s very legitimacy. Others, more soberly, have rediscovered the Palestinian tragedy and worked to incorporate it into Israel’s historical self-understanding. Still others simply recount the blunders, incompetence and occasional cowardice that characterize all national histories. The response to the new historians by more mainstream scholars will eventually produce a complex and ambivalent historical synthesis—not uncommon for other nations, but bereft of the old heroic simplicity.

The pioneering myth is similarly frayed. Israel can no longer view itself as a poor but struggling country, rebuilding a nation from an oppressed minority scattered around the world. Tel Aviv suburbs like Savion could almost be Palm Beach. Israeli teenagers in the ubiquitous shopping malls could be mistaken for their American counterparts. Even Ramat Rahel, a kibbutz whose poorly armed members halted the Egyptian army only a few miles south of Jerusalem in 1948, is uprooting its orchards for commuters’ condominiums.

Israelis are acutely aware of these changes, of course, but they have not yet figured out how to react. Generals talk gloomily of declining motivation, politicians admit privately that maybe the time has come to wean Israel from U.S. economic aid (an absurdity in a country whose per capita GNP is greater than that of all but twenty-one other countries), and

journalists write gleefully or mournfully of the rise of post-Zionism. But in many areas the reflexes remain the same: A system of military service increasingly at odds with society's endurance or security's dictates, rhetoric about need, aggressive lobbying of Congress and foreign Jewish philanthropists, and a political culture that oddly combines hero worship with extreme factionalism.

There has been, deservedly, some quiet satisfaction at what Israel has accomplished in fifty years. Its very successes, however, have given birth to challenges neither heroic nor straightforward. The country's air, water and land are imperiled by overuse and pollution. Its physical infrastructure is inadequate. Israel's deepest peril, however, is intangible and urgent: Nothing less than a reformulation of what statesmen in bygone days called "the Jewish question."

Political Zionism had many strains, but its dominant movement was secular and often anti-religious. Theodor Herzl was an assimilated, non-observant Jew who, like his followers, focused on the daunting problem of getting access to Palestine, bringing Jews there and building a society, an economy and a defensible state. They worried far less about the most critical component of that polity: Jews as such. Who were the Jews? It did not seem a problem. Bring Jews to Palestine, teach them Hebrew, remind them of the value of manual labor, have them redeem the homeland not by divine intervention but by sweat and blood, and—like Hungarians or Englishmen—they would know who they were.

Ironically, nothing is so daunting for Israel at fifty as its identity as a Jewish state. Attend a formal military ceremony, for example, and the one element missing—one usually found in the secular United States—is a religious invocation. An American rabbi serving as a chaplain could, with no discomfort to those present, open a military ceremony in the United States, but an Israeli rabbi doing so in the IDF would spark controversy; "Hebrew-speaking Gentiles," "Judeo-Nazis," "ayatollahs wearing *kipot*"—these epithets, all hurled in recent years, bespeak the antagonisms tearing Israel asunder. The acrimony reflects less a native intemperance than the genuine

perplexities of an identity that Israelis variously consider national, ethnic, religious or fictitious.

Whatever material successes they have had, Israelis can never achieve what so many of them crave—the benign normalcy that now characterizes Western societies and the United States above all. Small wonder that hundreds of thousands have emigrated over the years, most to the United States, which remains a mythic land of opportunity and forgetfulness to those who find the cramped confines of Israel and the tormented destiny of the Jews an intolerable burden. To the extent that the Zionist project craved normalcy as its consummation, it has failed utterly. There is no way it could have succeeded.

The success of Israel—and the catastrophe of the Holocaust, in a quite different way—has understandably overshadowed the miracle of Jewish survival and creativity over the centuries of the Jews' dispersion. Many Israelis have dismissed or even despised that experience. Ironically, however, they find themselves increasingly forced to wrestle with the questions that agitated the Jews in their wanderings: Who are we, and what is our mission? More than for any other state, a spiritual question lies at the heart of Israel's self-definition and, indeed, its very existence. In attempting to flee Jewish history, Zionism has been forced to confront it head-on—for if Israel ceased to be a Jewish state, it would cease to exist. Few prosperous peoples, in this age of superficial entertainments and instant gratification, confront such ultimate questions. As one that does, the Israelis have every reason to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary with joy, leavened by what their ancestors would have recognized as a vaguely religious dread.

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