

Forward?

In the winter of 1883, a unique celebration was held in Vienna, on the Jewish festival of Hanuka. Organized by the newly created Association of Jewish Students, the event was held in honor of the Maccabees—Jewish rebels who overthrew Hellenistic rule to establish an independent state in the land of Israel in the first century B.C.E. Those who attended were, for the most part, educated young men and women from Eastern Europe who sought to restore Jewish honor to its former heights. The event proved seminal to the history of modern Zionism: The tales of bravery and sacrifice of Judah Maccabee and his brothers provided an ideal rallying point for a sense of collective pride, which in turn helped inspire the movement for a Jewish national revival. The name of the student association was Kadima, meaning “forward.”

One hundred twenty-three years later, on March 26 of this year, a newly formed Israeli political party with the same name held a rally two days before the national elections. One of the event’s main speakers, Minister of Education Meir Sheerit, took the opportunity to explain what set the new centrist party apart from its competitors. Kadima owed its uniqueness, he asserted, to the repudiation of the old ideologies. “We have former members of the Labor party here today, former members of the Likud, and members who never belonged to any political party until now,” he said. “We’re not weighed down by the baggage of the legacies of Ze’ev Jabotinsky or Berl Katznelson. We look only to the future.” To bring his point home, he added that Kadima “no longer says that it is ‘good to die for our country,’ but rather that it is better to live in it.”

Sheetrit was referring, of course, to the dying words of the Zionist pioneer Joseph Trumpeldor, whose life and death became a symbol for the heroism of the Zionist movement. In downplaying the Trumpeldor ethos, however, Sheetrit is far from alone: Similar declarations are often made by Israeli public figures, artists, and writers, and it is safe to assume that they reflect an attitude widely held in Israeli society today. Indeed, many Israelis are tired of the stifling intensity that characterizes the country's political, religious, and social life. They long for a measure of normalcy; they yearn for room to breathe, and to shake off the yoke of the ideologies that they perceive as giving rise to a conflicted, and often violent, reality. And as the results of the latest elections and the low voter turnout make clear, more and more Israelis prefer to opt out of any kind of public involvement, choosing instead to retreat into their own private bubbles, and to pursue a comfortable, bourgeois life. In the exhaustive 2004 study *Farewell to Srulik: Changing Values Among the Israeli Elite*, Israeli sociologist Oz Almog dealt at length with this phenomenon, which he described as the “erosion of the gravitational pull of Zionist idealism and the culture of patriotism which it created.” The cause of this erosion, says Almog, is not rebellion, but rather detachment, “because we live in an era when the personal, the intimate, and the private gain complete preference over the general, the social, and the communal.” Yet the cause of this growing weariness of the old, ideological Zionism can also be traced to the all-too-high price it often exacts—self-sacrifice, or the readiness “to die for our country.”

It is hard to blame people who recoil from the demand to make the ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of an abstract idea such as “our country.” Nevertheless, abandoning the call for self-sacrifice is a luxury that no nation, and certainly not Israel, can afford. We can argue about the moral validity of this requirement from the vantage point of the individual; so, too, can we mourn the loss of cherished human life it entails. But the fact remains: We cannot ignore the necessity of this demand to the existence of the Jewish state—no less now than at any time in the past.

At one point or another in their history, many nations have adopted myths of heroic self-sacrifice, offering them as models of exemplary behavior to their sons and daughters. Trumpeldor's dying words, for example, were in fact merely a rewording of a famous epigram by the Roman poet Horace. Homer, too, expressed a similar idea in *The Iliad*: "If any of you is struck by spear or sword and loses his life, let him die; he dies with honor who dies fighting for his country." In modern times, the French writer Alexandre Dumas extolled the bravery of the revolutionaries of 1848 who stormed the barricades in Paris and sang of their readiness to die for France, and the United States continues to honor the patriot Nathan Hale, who, moments before the British hanged him in 1776, declared, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

The appeal of these national myths has waned of late, however; they hardly mesh with the liberal ethos according to which the preservation of individual rights or welfare is viewed as the most important duty of the state. Put simply, if the state exists only to serve the needs of its citizens, it has no legitimate authority to demand that they sacrifice everything on behalf of the national collective. Citizens can, of course, choose self-sacrifice of their own accord. Yet it is highly doubtful that they will, particularly if they are instilled with an ethos that grants absolute preference to individual over communal needs. Such people will view tales of heroism not as inspiring, but rather as the residue of a romantic nationalist mentality that is no longer relevant in today's enlightened, progressive world.

In contrast to this approach, it is important to reaffirm the value of self-sacrifice in our own time as a basic condition necessary for the survival of a sovereign political community. This point was articulated powerfully by G.W.F. Hegel in his seminal work *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Hegel drew a distinction between "civil society," in which individuals seek to further their self-interest through communal associations, and "the state,"

in which citizens take upon themselves responsibility for the good of the whole. While both types of social organization exist side by side and support one another, it is important not to confuse them. Indeed, as Hegel points out, “an entirely distorted account of the demand for this sacrifice results from regarding the state as a mere civil society and from regarding its final end as only the security of individual life and property.” The state, Hegel emphasizes, is more than a collection of individuals: Its existence is possible only insofar as its citizens demonstrate a willingness to forfeit the satisfaction of personal needs, and in particular their security: “Sacrifice on behalf of the individuality of the state,” he writes, “is the substantial tie between the state and all its members and so is a universal duty.” Unlike totalitarian thinkers, Hegel did not hold up the state as an absolute value. He did, however, understand clearly that the relationship between the state and its citizens cannot be reduced to concepts drawn exclusively from the lexicon of civil society.

The most obvious example is in the case of war. During peacetime, citizens place the protection of their own lives as a supreme goal; in war, however, a soldier’s duties often come into conflict with the urge to survive. While it is true that daring behavior in the heat of battle may be explained by various motives—tough training, the fear of being labeled a coward, even sheer recklessness—a country that sends its soldiers to battle cannot rely solely on these factors. Nothing less than a total devotion to larger collectives—be it one’s military unit, or one’s people or homeland—can compel soldiers to charge at the enemy as bullets fly past them. Only a sense of obligation that transcends self-interest can inspire soldiers to take risks that border on suicide (and sometimes even cross that line).

True, defense of one’s country is but one of the goals for which people are willing to give their lives, and it is not necessarily even the most noble one. People sacrifice on account of their faith, or the values they hold to be supreme; they even sacrifice on behalf of other individuals. In each of these situations, they demonstrate unusual strength of character and discover the best that is within them (or, if they are doing it deliberately to harm

innocents, the worst that is within them). What sets apart sacrifice for one's country from sacrifice for all other reasons is the fact that only within the framework of the state is self-sacrifice institutionalized; only there can the readiness for absolute concession be viewed not simply as an extreme act of selflessness, but as a permanent founding assumption, a prerequisite for the very existence of the political community.

Today there are many Israelis—as well as quite a few Europeans and some Americans—who rebel against this imperative, choosing instead to dissociate themselves from the political entity it serves. In their view, the state is a ravenous Moloch for whom we toss our sons into the fire of war, and thus we would be better off without it. Yet such utopian sentiments have on more than one occasion yielded political catastrophes, and paved the way for tyranny and anarchy. For better or worse, there is no real substitute for the state. And so long as this is the case, the denigration of sacrifice in the public mind is ultimately a perilous thing—for it undermines the foundations of our political life.

It is no small irony that the West, whose cultural identity was once infused with the religious ideal of self-sacrifice, has gone so far in denying the relevance of this ideal to our own time. But this shattered ideal has now come back to haunt us, in the form of a zealous new enemy, one who may be poorly equipped with the physical means to fight, but nonetheless boasts great determination and a powerful attraction to martyrdom. September 11 clearly showed that even a small group of people willing to give their lives to a greater cause can wreak havoc on the greatest economic and military power in the world.

In this war against terror and the countries that sanction it, the West enjoys a tremendous superiority of technology and material resources, an advantage that enables it to safeguard its soldiers' lives. Satellites, precision-guided missiles, and armed drones can do much of the work that would, if left to soldiers, exact a heavy price. Nevertheless, the West's successful

military campaigns have had little impact on the terrorists' willingness to fight; on the contrary, they continue to launch attack after attack with a seemingly unlimited supply of volunteers to perform suicide missions. Knowing that their holy war will not be won with superior technology, jihadists rely on an unflinching dedication to their beliefs. In this regard, they see the West as grotesquely inferior: After all, they reason, how can all those sleepy, overweight, *comfortable* Westerners really hold out against an army of determined warriors eager to die for their faith?

In an interview with the *Washington Post* after the 2002 suicide bombing at the Park Hotel in Netanya that killed thirty Israelis, Ismail Haniyeh, today the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, explained what gives hope to the terrorists of Hamas: "Anyone reading an Israeli newspaper can see their suffering," he said about the Jews. They "love life more than any other people, and they prefer not to die." "That is really sick," Thomas L. Friedman retorted in his column in the *New York Times*. "The Palestinians are so blinded by their narcissistic rage that they have lost sight of the basic truth civilization is built on: The sacredness of every human life, starting with your own." The French intellectual Jean Baudrillard showed a better understanding of the jihad mentality by refusing to assume, as Friedman does, that all cultures take as their premise the sanctity of human life. Responding to the September 11 attacks, he explained that the terrorists

succeeded in turning their own death into an absolute weapon against a system that operates on the basis of the exclusion of death, a system whose ideal is of zero deaths. Every zero-death system is a zero-sum-game system. And all the means of deterrence and destruction can do nothing against an enemy who has already turned his death into a counter-strike weapon. "What does the American bombing matter? Our men are as eager to die as the Americans are to live!"

There is an element of truth to Baudrillard's depiction of the West as a system that fears death and seeks to exclude it. But this is, one must remember, relatively new. Stories detailing the self-sacrifice of individuals

and groups have been part of Western history since its inception. In the first great clash between “East” and “West,” that of Persia and Greece, the Spartans sacrificed themselves in defense of their country along a mountain pass at Thermopylae in 480 B.C.E. Carved into the memorial erected in their honor were the following words, written in Greek: “Go, stranger, and tell the Spartans that we lie here in obedience to their laws.” Hundreds of years later, the British writer and critic John Ruskin remarked that this epitaph is the noblest group of words ever uttered by man. Indeed, generations of young Europeans were educated by the light of the ideal these words express. Can this ideal already be forgotten?

The Jews, of course, have their own heroic myths—tales of courage that span thousands of years, from the Maccabees to their modern battles with the Arab armies. Times have changed, however. For even though many still volunteer for the army’s elite units, if we are to believe Israeli historian Yael Zerubavel, “the motivation for this volunteering is an individualistic trend which aspires to personal fulfillment rather than the ideology of sacrifice for national aims.” Trumpeldor’s dying words have long since become, in the Zionist discourse, a nationalist cliché, easy prey for the post-modern cynicism in fashion today. Indeed, anyone who employs them seriously is likely to be suspected of fascism, or at least anachronism. It is no wonder, then, that an Israeli education minister can proudly declare that in his party, people no longer say that “it is good to die for our country.”

But Israel, we must remember, is a nation at war. Much as Israelis may want to, they cannot simply abandon the heroic Zionist ethos that fortified and encouraged the nation during so many trials in the past. The dreams of founding a peace-loving civilization in a “New Middle East,” where every man sits under his vine and fig tree, have long been discredited. This is the bitter reality of the life that Israelis face today. There is something not merely illusory, but even dangerous, in seeking solace and distraction in the rhetoric of “normalcy,” as though this alone will bring prosperity and peace in a new global economic order. Indeed, this is precisely what the enemies of the Jewish state—who consistently underestimate the fortitude

of the Israeli citizen—are counting on. So long as the assault on the right of the Jews to live as a sovereign nation continues, there is no choice but to believe that despite everything, and to the very end, it is good to die for our country.

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