

# ISRAEL, POST EUPHORIA

Who is wise?

The one who can foresee consequences.

—Babylonian Talmud

In the summer of 2007, Avrum Burg, scion of a distinguished Israeli political family, a former speaker of the Knesset, a former chairman of the Jewish Agency, and a man widely acknowledged in Israel as possessing both a prodigious intellect and a promising political future, published his controversial book, *Victory Over Hitler*. In it he claimed that “to define the State of Israel as a Jewish state is the key to its end. A Jewish state is explosive. It’s dynamite.” Burg, once seen as a possible future leader of Israel’s long-dominant Labor Party, doubted that a Jewish democratic state could survive. In a postpublication interview with Israel’s most elite daily newspaper, he urged Israelis to obtain foreign passports, presumably to prepare to leave.

Ironically, Burg’s book appeared almost forty years to the day after the end of the Six Day War. That war had left Israelis feeling triumphant and invincible; it had seemed to set aside for once and for all the question of whether the Jewish state could survive.

In the days prior to June 1967, it was far from clear that Israel would survive. In the period now called the *hamtanah*, “the waiting,” Israelis were beyond worried, preparing for the worst. Amassing its army and saber rattling, Egypt lay to the south. To the east, Israel faced Jordan, and to the north, Syria and Lebanon. All had vowed to destroy the Jewish state. As historian Michael Oren recounts in his masterful best-seller, *Six Days of War*:

Throughout the country, thousands were hurrying to dig trenches, build shelters, and fill sandbags. In Jerusalem . . . schools were refitted as bomb shelters, and air raid drills were practiced daily. . . . An urgent request for surgeons . . . was submitted to the Red Cross, and extra units of plasma ordered from abroad. . . . Upwards of 14,000 hospital beds were readied, and antidotes stockpiled for poison gas victims, expected to arrive in waves of 200. Some 10,000 graves were dug.

But the doomsday scenarios never materialized. In a lightning preemptive strike, Israeli jets destroyed Egypt’s air force just hours before it would have attacked the Jewish state, and the Israel Defense Forces captured the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip from Egyptian forces. From Syria, Israel took the strategically critical Golan Heights. From Jordan, which ignored Israel’s warnings to stay out of the war and foolishly joined the fray, the IDF seized the West Bank of the Jordan River and the eastern half of Jerusalem. In six quick days, Israel tripled its size, from 8,000 to 26,000 square miles.

Finally Israel seemed to be out of danger. True, at the Khartoum conference three months after the war, Israel’s Arab enemies still insisted that there would be “no peace, no recognition and no negotiations” with Israel, but neither Israelis nor American Jews paid much attention to the bluster of Khartoum. At long last, Jews worldwide felt secure. Israel seemed invincible. From America to the Soviet Union, a new pride in Israel—and in being Jewish—began to emerge. American Jews came out of the woodwork as they never had before, and Soviet Jews began what would become a relentless campaign to receive permission to emigrate.

Finally it seemed that the Shoah\* and its threats had been relegated to the past. The Jews had an indestructible home; from now on, they would no longer be slaughtered at the whim of others. Everything had changed. The Jewish future appeared brighter than it had in hundreds of years.

And the reason for that bright future was the State of Israel.

But within a decade or two, a new challenge arose. Now the Palestinians insisted that they, too, deserved a state. (For our purposes, we will ignore the raging debate as to whether the Palestinians are, in fact, a nation, and why and how their “nationalism” was “created.” The world accepts the argument that they are a nation, as do many Israelis, and that is the fact that Israel must reckon with.) After initial resistance, some Israelis and many American supporters of Israel began to view this nascent Palestinian nationalism as something akin to the American civil-rights movement—it was a movement representing people who had not received their due, who simply wanted to be treated fairly. African Americans wanted equal pay and social access, just like whites had. And Palestinians only wanted statehood, just like the Jews had. Despite a few high-profile Palestinians committed to terror and to Israel’s destruction, Palestinian nationalism was essentially about human rights. Given a chance to realize their dreams, they would make the accommodations necessary to live beside the Jewish state.

Or so it seemed. Decades later, we know that that assessment was wildly optimistic. Rather than being a civil-rights movement with a terrorist element, Palestinian nationalism has proved itself a terror-based movement dressed in civil-rights garb. By and large, Palestinian leadership is sadly much more intent on destroying Israel than on working toward statehood and a better life for the Palestinian rank

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\*“Shoah” in Hebrew means “calamity.” “Holocaust” is an English word that means “burnt offering” or “sacrifice to God.” The Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s were not sacrificed—they were murdered. There is a tremendous difference; this book uses the word “Shoah” in order to take that difference seriously.

and file. Those people who had believed that territorial accommodation would bring the conflict to an end were sadly proven wrong.

But Americans and Israelis refused to give up. In 2000, President Bill Clinton invited Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian chairman Yassir Arafat to Camp David for meetings that were designed to achieve a long-term settlement between the warring parties. According to Ambassador Dennis Ross, who served as Clinton's point man on the peace process during that period, Barak made far-reaching concessions on both territory and security. But the talks collapsed in July 2000, and two months later, war erupted.

The war didn't actually "erupt," of course. It was carefully and consciously orchestrated at least in part by Arafat, who'd had his bluff called. Still defying calls to accept Israel's existence, Arafat responded to Barak's offer by unleashing a wave of terrorism, commonly but mistakenly called the Second Intifada,\* or even more cynically, the "Al Aksa Intifada." The war kept Israel miserable and fearful for four long years. Eventually, despite horrific losses on both sides, Israel's security forces managed to get the upper hand. A protective barrier was constructed along significant portions of Israel's eastern border, army intelligence successfully infiltrated much of the Palestinian terrorist network, and security inside Israel improved considerably. Gradually the violence that had kept Israel in its grip for so long began to subside.

Amazingly, Israelis decided to take yet another stab at creating peace and launching a Palestinian state. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, long considered a right-wing hawk and nicknamed the "Bulldozer," boldly announced that he would undertake a unilateral withdrawal ("Disengagement") from Gaza in order to move Israeli troops to more defensible lines and to further the prospect of Palestinian statehood. The Disengagement meant uprooting thousands of Israelis from homes

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\*"Intifada" in Arabic means "popular uprising," which this war was not. This was not the people's uprising, and there was nothing spontaneous about it. It was executed by Arafat's security forces and other terror organizations, which he controlled and financed to various extents. For that reason, this book shies away from the term "intifada" and refers to those years as what they were—the Palestinian Terror War.

and communities that they'd built over decades. Some of these people had already been displaced once before from their homes in Yamit, an Israeli town that was evacuated in 1982 when the Sinai Desert was returned to Egypt. But still, Sharon insisted, he was going to proceed with the plan, no matter how unpopular it was in certain circles.

Despite all the prognostications to the contrary and the worry about a possible civil war, the Disengagement unfolded as scheduled in August 2005 and went smoothly. Not a shot was fired. People wept bitterly as they were led from the houses they had built, from the synagogues in which they'd celebrated and mourned. Anguished at leaving behind the communities in which their parents and their children had lived side by side, they were heartbroken, but they did not resist. The security forces, which had enormous firepower at their disposal, used none; by and large, they treated the people they were removing with extraordinary respect and compassion. It was one of Israel's more dignified moments, and it left some previously worried or despondent Israelis with a deep sense of pride, and with more than a glimmer of hope.

Israel had approached the precipice of civil war but had backed away. The Palestinians now had more land and another opportunity to begin building a state; maybe the region would witness the beginnings of a nascent Palestine with which Israel could finally reach a long-term accommodation.

But those hopes were soon dashed once again. Soon after the Disengagement was completed, Palestinians capitalized on Israel's departure and began a relentless wave of *kassam* rocket fire on Israeli civilian population centers adjoining the Gaza border. As Israelis waited to see what Sharon, "Mr. Security," would do in response, the prime minister suffered a massive stroke and fell into a permanent coma.

The *kassam* rocket fire was followed by the Palestinians' election of Hamas instead of Fatah; many Palestinians apparently preferred a terrorist organization publicly committed to Israel's destruction to the party that Yassir Arafat had started. Arafat's party had at least said publicly—even if Israelis no longer believed it—that it was ready to negotiate. Now Palestinians appeared uninterested even in the charade.

Israelis felt duped. Some were angry, most were depressed. Peace with the Palestinians—which Israelis had assumed only a few years earlier was both inevitable and just around the corner—now seemed less achievable than ever.

And then, less than a year after the Disengagement, Israel fought yet another war. Three Israeli soldiers were kidnapped from inside Israel's borders, one near Gaza and two on the northern border with Lebanon. When the latter two were kidnapped, full-scale war quickly erupted. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who had been elected after Sharon's incapacitation, promised a suddenly united populace that Israel would win a decisive victory, and that the war would not end until Hezbollah was disarmed and dismembered and the captured soldiers brought home.

But Israel fared poorly in the thirty-four-day war. Surprised by a Hezbollah more determined and better trained than it had expected, the IDF could not end the fire of Katyusha rockets on Israel's north. Eventually, with Hezbollah still very much intact and with the soldiers still in captivity, their fates unknown, Israel agreed to a cease fire. It was lost on few Israelis that there was no substantive territorial dispute between Israel and Hezbollah. The issue was not borders but Israel's very existence. Short of going out of business, there was nothing that Israel could have done to appease Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah and his fighters. Yet unable to avert the conflict, Israel also seemed incapable of winning it.

In the forty-odd years since the lightning victory in the Six Day War, everything had changed. In 1967, Israel had won decisively; in 2006, Israel had lost. In 1967, Israel faced enemies in the form of states. Now, instead of facing nation-states such as Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, Israel faced terror organizations that could, and did, hide among a civilian population for which they felt no responsibility. And Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and Hamas were supported not by Egypt and Jordan, but ultimately by Iran, with its seemingly limitless petrodollars and its looming nuclear capability.

Suddenly territorial compromise was not the issue. What was at stake was the future of the Jewish state, nothing more, nothing less. And that future seemed much less certain than it had just four decades earlier.

Israel entered a period of deep depression, compounded by a series of corruption scandals that included, by the time it reached its height, the two chief rabbis, two former justice ministers, senior officials in the Tax Authority, the police chief (as well as the man suggested as his replacement), the president (who was accused of rape), and the prime minister (implicated in six different alleged schemes) himself. Beset by enemies, Israelis began to speak about losing faith in themselves and in their ability to create a decent, civil, law-abiding society.

The euphoria was gone; once again, the looming question was whether Israel could actually survive. Even Avrum Burg, that former speaker of the Knesset, was saying that it couldn't.

A year after Burg's book appeared, a friend of ours visited us in Jerusalem. It was the summer of 2008. A prisoner exchange agreement with Hezbollah had been signed, sporadic talks with Hamas to free Gilad Shalit were still under way, and Ehud Olmert's government was exploring the possibility of serious peace negotiations with the Syrians. But very few people in Israel were optimistic. Even Israel's perennially upbeat President Shimon Peres, whose vision of a "new Middle East" had once inspired many, admitted that there was "no chance of peace with the Palestinians."

And our friend, a nationally respected leader of American Jewish life, simply couldn't bear the pessimism. With his deeply rooted sense that people at their core are decent and reasonable, he just could not understand how even our fifteen-year-old son, Micha, shared the view that he'd heard earlier in the week from General Yaakov Amidror (the former head of research in Army Intelligence). Amidror had said that no peace with the Palestinians was possible, and that none would be for at least a generation. Enormously bright, exceedingly well educated, and chronically optimistic, our friend was hearing things during his trip to Israel that simply didn't cohere with any picture he had of how American Jews ought to think about Israel.

Ultimately, as the painful conversation wore on, he focused his questions into two: "Why, really, has Israel given up hope?" he wanted

to know. “And with no genuine chance for peace, why forge on?” They seemed to be reasonable questions, but as my daughter, Talia, pointed out to me a few days later, they were also wrong. “We’ve given up hope for *peace*,” Talia said to me, “but that doesn’t mean we’ve given up hope.” Israel had only “given up hope” if the sole hope that Israel has is for peace. But it isn’t. And as for why forge on, Talia pointed out, that’s only a legitimate question if Israel’s only purpose is to live in peace, if it has no other reason for being. “But wanting peace isn’t the same thing as being *about* peace,” my daughter said. And she was right.

Yet most observers of Israel, both in Israel and outside, do not see matters that way. When they think of Israel’s hopes, they think almost exclusively of peace. When asked what they want most for Israel, they respond that they want peace and security. Beyond that, they have little to say. When asked to imagine an Israel that might not ever know peace, they cannot. When asked why Israel ought to continue to exist if it will be at war well into the indefinite future, they are not certain how to respond.

That has to change. Tragically, genuine peace does not yet appear possible between Israel and its enemies. Therefore, if Israel is to survive, if Israelis are to make lives and raise their children in a country continually at war, they will need to be able to articulate to themselves why a Jewish state matters and why preserving Israel is worth the sometimes excruciating price that it exacts. Though Israel does face real threats from Iran and from terrorist groups much closer to home, those can all be dealt with—if Israelis know why their country exists and are committed to its survival. To survive, Israel needs citizens at home and supporters abroad who can articulate why the Jewish state exists in the first place and who can then take the necessary steps to preserve it. This book is designed to further that goal.

Can Israel survive? Does it deserve to? Those are the questions about Israel that are in vogue today. To be sure, some excellent books have been written to address these questions and to bolster Israel’s case. Some respond point by point to the most common accusations against Israel. Others have asked *whether* Israel can survive. But the question

of whether Israel can survive isn't terribly interesting. Prophecy, the Jewish tradition asserts, is a role that has now been given to fools and children. Especially in the Middle East, predicting the future is a highly risky and usually fruitless venture.

Of much greater importance than asking *whether* Israel can continue to exist is examining the question of *why* Israel's survival might matter in the first place. What has Israel done for the Jewish people? How has Israel changed Jewish life not only inside the Jewish state, but around the world? Do the Jews really need a state? And if they do, what must they do to save it?

Those are the questions this book sets out to address. In the first two chapters, I ask why the Jews *really* need a state, and how sovereignty is intended to wholly alter Jewish life. In the following five chapters, we will examine a variety of factors that now threaten the Jewish state, most of them having little to do with Israel's enemies. The final five chapters outline a variety of steps Israel must take if the dream of Jewish sovereignty is not to be lost.

Not everyone will be comfortable with what is discussed or suggested in these pages. But as is true with all of life's difficult questions, there is no avoiding them. With matters concerning Israel as with life in general, we *can* retreat, refusing to raise the painful issues. Or we can choose to think, to struggle, and to grow. This book opts for the latter choice, the pain that that choice sometimes entails notwithstanding. It does so not because there is joy in recognizing the depths of the challenges that Israel faces. Rather, we raise these issues in the hope that, convinced once again of Israel's necessity, Zionists will find the strength to stride forth with courage and vision, leading Israel to a future that is even more inspiring than its past has already been.