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One On One: Rehab for an 'all-consuming peace addiction'

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Ruthie Blum Leibowitz, THE JERUSALEM POST

"The one thing we don't talk about here is what type of country we are creating," says Shalem Center senior vice president and senior fellow Daniel Gordis, with conviction.

Indeed, asserts Gordis - the author of *Saving Israel: How the Jewish People Can Win a War that May Never End*, his latest of seven books on Jewish thought and life in Israel - "So focused have we been with resolving the conflict with the Palestinians that we have neglected to pay proper heed to issues no less critical for our survival."

They may even be more so, says Gordis, former director of the Mandel Foundation's Leadership Institute in Jerusalem, who joined Shalem in 2007 to help establish the country's first liberal arts college.

Gordis, 49, made aliya from Los Angeles in 1998 with his wife and three children. A rabbi, he says he prefers being referred to as "traditional," rather than "Orthodox" ("I shy away from those labels"). And he firmly believes that it is not only possible to make room for "passionate discourse" about the nature of Israeli society and statehood, but imperative. Otherwise, he warns, Israel will be little more than a "Hebrew-speaking version" of America or Europe, whose citizens cannot articulate what it is they are doing here, or where they are headed. If that happens, he adds, "our enemies will have won."

"The goal of the book," he explains, "is not to prescribe precisely what we ought to do, but rather to initiate a conversation - to raise the question of the issues we would be debating if we were not constantly fretting over peace."

What he suggests, then, is to "put peace aside."

"When the Palestinians give us quiet," he says, "we'll have quiet. When they don't, we'll defend ourselves. And though we can't ever give up yearning for peace, we mustn't allow our yearning for it to paralyze us. Nor can we put our lives on hold."

In your article, "When Mistakes Are Worth Making" [July 2008, on his blog, called "Dispatches from an Anxious State" - www.danielgordis.org], you defended the prisoner exchange for abducted - and murdered - soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, as well as the disengagement from Gaza, on the grounds that, though perhaps not strategically wise, they were good for Israel's soul. On the other hand, in your book,

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not strategically wise, they were good for Israel's soul. On the other hand, in your book, you describe the difference between the positive atmosphere in this country following the Six Day War and the very different one of today. How do these two views not contradict one another?

I felt that the prisoner exchange highlighted something incredibly powerful and positive about the Israeli soul. And though many in the security establishment felt that it was not strategically wise, because it made us vulnerable to the sort of blackmail we're being subjected to now with Gilad Schalit, I thought it was an extraordinary testimony to the ability of the Israeli soul to somehow trump strategy, and to reembrace our ongoing commitment to each and every one of the young men who defend this country, bringing them home no matter what, and giving peace to their families.

I'm not saying that it was smart, or even that it was the choice that should have been made. That's why I called it a "mistake worth making."

As far as disengagement is concerned, in retrospect, there's no question that it was a mistake, in terms of Israel's security and defense. But I hesitate to call it an out-and-out mistake - without in any way minimizing the horrible human cost to the families who were uprooted - because I think we learned something we could only have learned by doing it. What no one can reasonably deny now is that the Right was right.

As someone who used to be left of center, I always believed that the Palestinians wanted the same things we did - that they sought two states for two peoples; that they wanted a country just like we did; that they wished for their children and grandchildren to flourish, just like we did. Disengagement proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was wrong - tragically wrong, but wrong nonetheless. Because what they had was an opportunity to begin to build some sort of autonomy. And it became clear that this is not what they had, or have, in mind. They are much more intent on destroying us than they are on building themselves. They're much more committed to our not having a future than to their having one.

Surely someone like you knows the Bible and the history of the Jewish people. Why did it take certain very current events in this country to teach you about something that seems to be a recurring theme since biblical times? What caused you to have faith in an idea that, given all that has occurred previously, would have been hard to trust?

First of all, I'm an American, who came to Israel at the age of 40. I was raised - in a suburban, Jewish, democratic, liberal, optimistic family - to believe that, at the end of the day, all conflicts are resolvable, and that all people basically want the same things for themselves and their children.

Secondly, the Jewish experience is not monolithic. So, though the biblical account certainly contains its share of resentment and hatred of the Jews, it also dares to dream of a different day.

Third, the American-Jewish experience has shown that you can leave a country where you were hated, and come to a new place where you will be embraced. Had my grandfather wanted to go to Columbia University, he might well not have been admitted because of his Jewishness. When my father wanted to go to Columbia, he got in, but there were unspoken limits on the number of Jews accepted. By the time I went to Columbia, it was 35 percent-40% Jewish. So, yes, there is the biblical experience - and warning. But there's also one's personal experience. And my personal experience gave me hope that, just as resistance to Jews had dissipated in America, the same might happen here. It hasn't.

Contemporary Israeli history seems to have the opposite shift. You write about the euphoria after the Six Day War, and about the gradual decline in that sense of victory and safety. So, from the country that conducted the Entebbe raid in 1976, Israel in 2009 is a state that exchanges terrorists for kidnapped IDF soldiers.

Here, too, there are competing vectors. Take Egypt and Jordan, for example.

Though peace with neither is perfect, nobody would have imagined in August 1967 that we would be where we are today with those countries. No one would have believed he'd be able to hop on a plane to Cairo, or in a car to Amman. Who would have imagined in 1968 that Egypt would one day be the mediator between Israel and a terrorist organization - Hamas, in this instance?

What some of us underestimated, however, was the degree of residual hatred in the fundamentalist Islamic world, not only for the State of Israel, but for what the State of Israel does for Jewish healing and flourishing. We've learned - to our sadness and to their detriment - that the Arabs don't want to make a deal with us right now. On one level, what my book addresses is how we can and should free ourselves from our peace addiction. It is an addiction that has become so all-consuming that even the Labor Party - which used to be focused on socioeconomic issues - ran on a security platform in these last elections.

In fact, all the major parties are so focused on what to do with the Palestinians that there is no room for a conversation about what we, as Israelis, want to build here. We're so focused on waiting for them to give us quiet, legitimacy and recognition that we have stopped asking ourselves very fundamental questions about what we're trying to accomplish with Jewish sovereignty. The problem with this is that we end up - to use a phrase in the Talmud - "*kereah mikan umikan*," bald from both ends. On one side, we don't have peace, and on the other, we also don't work on building the kind of society we dream of.

In *Saving Israel*, what I'm trying to say is: When an indigenous democratic movement emerges in Palestinian society - whether that is in five years, 50 or beyond that - it will know where to find us. It knows that the olive branch has been extended by Israel every time there's been even a glimmer - and sometimes less than that - of a reason to extend one. What I suggest is that we begin to ask ourselves questions that have nothing to do with our enemies, and everything to do with ourselves.

For example, what kind of democracy do we want to build here? Some American immigrants and many foreign observers assume that it should be a Hebrew-speaking version of the United States. But this is problematic. The American founding fathers could not, in their wildest dreams, have imagined that an African-American would be president one day, and it's a great triumph of American democracy that he was elected, regardless of what one thinks of his policies. And if, 100 years from now, the demographics in the US will have changed dramatically, to the extent that the country - and therefore Congress - is mostly Asian, that, too, would be a triumph of American democracy.

But what if Israel, over the course of the next century, were to become mostly non-Jewish - maybe Arab - and the Knesset reflected that? Would that be a triumph of Israeli democracy?

I argue that, on the contrary, it would constitute a failure, because the State of Israel was not created to be, as Abraham Lincoln said, "of the people, by the people, for the people."

It was created to be "of the Jews, by the Jews and for the Jews."

It was established specifically for the purpose of Jewish flourishing, revival and healing, after the horrors of the 20th century.

But how does that jibe with the desire to be a democratic state? [Israel Beiteinu leader Avigdor] Lieberman is raising that crucial question, with a little less subtlety and nuance than I would have liked, but raising it nevertheless. And it's one we will not be able to talk about until we liberate ourselves from our peace addiction.

Another example: When we talk about the religious versus secular issue, we say that each group should educate its children as it sees fit. But should this really be the case? Is it actually the secular community's own business how little their children know about Jewish tradition? We're appalled that Israeli kids are ranking low in math, but when they don't know anything about Judaism, we say, well, that's their personal choice. But this is actually a strategic issue for Israel, because if kids - and then soldiers and young adults, and then young adults raising their own children - cannot articulate anything about what is grand and magnificent and profound about Jewish tradition, it becomes almost impossible to defend the idea of a Jewish state. Educational failure will inevitably result in the fall of the state.

If, at some point in the future, there is genuine peace in the region and an absence of anti-Semitism in the world, why does it matter whether Israeli children don't know or care why they are here? At that point, what difference does it make whether there is a Jewish state or not?

Because the Jewish state is not only a shelter from anti-Semitism. The Jewish state is about something infinitely more profound. Because it is the only place in which the Jews are the majority, it is the place where we can, and must, build something unique - a kind of Jewish life that is categorically different from what exists in other countries. Let's take the US, where Jewish life thrives the most. There, the Jews don't do anything in their own language. They don't write books or music or plays in their own language. Can you imagine French culture not in French, or a Verdi opera not in Italian, or a Dostoevsky if there had been no Russian? In other words, our greatness can be seen in an A.B. Yehoshua or a David Grossman taking the Bible and weaving its vocabulary, narratives and subtle poetry into contemporary Israeli literature. That's part of what Israel's about.

And Israel is also about determining what to do when refugees from Darfur come through the Egyptian border. And about this, two things have to get said. One is from the Mishna and the other from the Torah. The Mishna says you have to take care of your own poor first. The Torah says you cannot oppress the stranger, because you were a stranger in the land of Egypt. This battle between the Mishna and the Torah is the dialogue that ought to be conducted in the Jewish state, and can be conducted only here. Other examples of what can be unique here abound.

You talk about these things as though Israel doesn't yet have or engage in them. But don't we have the very literature you mention, and don't we have continual Mishna-Torah-like debates about everything, including the refugees from Darfur?

Of course, I'm the last person in the world who would say the country has failed. We ought to be extraordinarily proud of Israel's accomplishments. But there is also cause for concern. The quality of education is not what it used to be. The levels of Jewish illiteracy are much greater now than they were even 10 to 20 years ago. The curriculum in the secular school system is not what it was. The level of post-Zionism as reflected in certain philosophy and political science departments of Israel's better universities is much more pronounced than it was. So, there's A.B. Yehoshua and there's David

Grossman, but who will come after them? The point is that we have to preserve what we've

Grossman, but who will come after them? The point is that we have to preserve what we've accomplished, make sure it continues to flourish and certainly not let it recede.

Is this a top-down or a bottom-up process? In other words, is it an issue of having an education minister who will determine how many hours per week pupils spend on Jewish studies, or would it be best accomplished through the free market, with private initiatives and competition, to entice parents to want more for their children?

At the end of the day, only bottom-up will work, though obviously there has to be some government vision and involvement. But, just as we can't impose peace on the Palestinians - they have to be ready for it - we can't impose a conception of the "educated Israeli" on the public. We need to offer a vision of a different sort of intellectual life, and afford them opportunities to prepare to embrace it.

At the Shalem Center, we are in the process of trying to establish Israel's first liberal arts college, which is a bottom-up model. Our idea is to attract the very best of the country's students - who are interested in studying the finest of Western, Jewish and Zionist traditions - and having them become the kind of leaders who can foster change as journalists, educators, professors, politicians, writers and more. The goal is to offer people a different educational model that will teach them to think differently, and in so doing, will entice them into conducting the intellectually rigorous and culturally exciting conversations that should be at the core of this society, and would be, if only we educated people differently and were also able to sidestep our present peace addiction.

Using the approaching Pessah holiday as a metaphor - and given what you are saying about peace addiction - would you say that the Jewish people may not have fully left the land of Egypt?

We've left the land of Egypt in the sense that we're the masters of our own destiny and the determinants of the nature of the society in which we live.

But we've allowed ourselves to be enslaved in a certain way, as well. We've allowed ourselves to be enslaved by an unrelenting concern with what the world thinks of us. And we've allowed ourselves to be handcuffed by this abiding yearning for peace.

But is Israel really at liberty to do what it wants without international approval?

I believe we're much more at liberty to do what we want than we allow ourselves to think - though we do need to do a better job of hasbara [public diplomacy], and engage in much more effective efforts to explain our actions to heads of state and communities abroad.

Why is it so important for Israel to explain itself to the outside world? Haven't you been asserting that it needs to start examining what kind of country it wants to be internally

Well, yes, but we have to be realistic, as well. We don't want to be embargoed by NATO or have foreign troops stationed on our soil. So we have to pay some attention to what the outside world thinks of us. It's a delicate balancing act, whereby we explain ourselves to the world, but don't become totally dependent on the world's approval, and so fearful of the world's opprobrium that we're left clamoring for their seal of legitimacy.

You attribute Israelis' neglecting of crucial societal questions to an excessive preoccupation with war and peace. Couldn't an argument be made from the exact

opposite direction - according to which Israelis are too busy watching Big Brother and Survivor to care either about diplomacy or about Jewish culture?

It is true that what many Israelis desire is an Israel that is a Hebrew-speaking version of a European country. And, in some respects, they've achieved it. The desire for normalcy is understandable. The Jews have grown weary of being exceptional. Being exceptional, Jewish history has shown, often carries a painful price. But - going back to what the Bible has to teach us - it is our mission to be exceptional. This is not about being "better" than others in some unsophisticated way, but about having a particular role to play in the world, a unique voice that needs to be heard. I would love to see Israeli society begin to engage in a huge, passionate argument about what that mission is. Because in the absence of a sense of purpose on our part, our enemies win.

Is it not possible that it is precisely our enemies who provide us with a sense of purpose? After all, in the absence of war and in the presence of freedom, Jews assimilate.

That's a possibility, of course. One could make the argument that this is what the American-Jewish experience has proved. But what's the response to this? To hope for war and and to pray that we have enemies? I don't think so. The Jews have survived for so long by being strategic and thoughtful and nuanced about how to respond to the challenges of whatever era we are living in. Today's challenge ought not be an exception.

Speaking of this era's challenges, as a traditional Jew do you not understand the fear of a slippery slope where religious pluralism is concerned - an issue that has come strongly to the fore in the forming of the current coalition?

Of course I understand the fear of the slippery slope. Ideally, we want a country and a society in which people recognized as Jews are recognized as Jews across the board, so that they can marry each other legally, or get divorced and remarry. The question is: What is the cost of that dream? If the cost is a central rabbinate controlled by a small number of people who are largely out of touch with society, it's too high.

The rabbinic institutions in this country are designed to protect against the slippery slope you mention, but they have become so insular and protective of their own territory that they do not allow Judaism to compete in the marketplace of ideas. As a result, nontraditional Jews in this country all too often see traditional Judaism as monolithic, backward and unconcerned with the pressing issues of our age. In the places in the world where Judaism is making a comeback, it is doing so because it has to make an intellectual and spiritual case for what it has to offer. It has shown, in America and elsewhere, that it has something profound to offer in the face of the meaninglessness and purposelessness that often characterizes modernity or post-modernity. I say, let 1,000 voices ring out. The slippery slope is a danger, but what we've allowed to fester here is infinitely more problematic.

How and when will you be able to determine whether Israel has succeeded at implementing your ideas?

*In 1959 - 50 years ago - Arthur Hertzberg published *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader*. It's an anthology of brilliant Zionist thinking that takes up many hundreds of pages. But who's engaging in that sort of thought and debate today, in Israel or anywhere else? The challenge for us today is to ensure that when a generation from now somebody comes along to write "The*

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for us today is to ensure that when, a generation from now, somebody comes along to write "The Zionist Idea, Volume II," it is no less weighty, and no less profound, than its predecessor.

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