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The Jewish path back to Israeli democracy

I've been part of the Israeli story for too long to despair – sooner or later, this coalition of destruction will unravel

This past summer I marked a personal milestone: forty years since moving to Israel.

The summer of 1982 was one of the lowest points in Israeli history. All the ambivalence over Israel that would divide the Jewish people in the coming decades began to coalesce that summer, as Israel was fighting a war that large parts of the Israeli public regarded as unnecessary and deceitful.

I had joined an Israel that was, for the first time, bitterly divided over perception of threat. War had always united Israelis; now, war was dividing them. Inconceivably, there were massive anti-government demonstrations even as the IDF was fighting at the front. Reservists completing their month of service would return their equipment and head directly to the daily protests outside the Prime Minister's residence. If external threat could no longer unite us, what would hold this fractious people together?

Israel's Judiciary: Reform or Ruin? Keep Watching

These days, as Israel faces another historic internal crisis, I find myself thinking a great deal about the summer of '82. Then, we lost our unity in the face of external threat; now, we've lost our unifying identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

I am among those Israelis who regard the Netanyahu coalition as a mortal danger to our internal cohesion and democratic legitimacy, a historic disgrace. Each day seems to bring some new, previously inconceivable violation of a moral and national red line. Can you believe it? I say to myself, sometimes aloud. The blows are coming from so many directions that as soon as I focus on one threat, another demands my attention. My ordinarily insatiable appetite for Israeli news has been reduced to skimming the headlines: Reading the details is too painful.

The Netanyahu government is the most politically extreme, the most morally corrupt and the most contemptuous of good governance in Israel's history. We have known governments with extremist elements, governments rife with corruption or incompetence. But not all at once and not to this extent.

This government that speaks in the name of Torah desecrates the name of Judaism. This government that speaks in the name of the Jewish people risks tearing apart the Israeli-Diaspora relationship. This government that speaks in the name of the Israeli ethos is the greatest threat to the ethos that binds Israelis together. This government that speaks in the name of Israeli security is an unimagined gift to those seeking to isolate and criminalize the Jewish state.

No Israeli government has had more ministers convicted of crimes or under indictment. None has had such disregard for our national institutions, randomly dismantling ministries and distributing the pieces like spoils of war. No other government has shown such disdain for basic standards of behavior, of decency. No other government has declared war against the judicial

system, which Netanyahu ally Alan Dershowitz, warning against fixing what isn't broken, calls the gold standard of judiciaries.

This government threatens to push liberal Israelis to the breaking point, presenting them with a vision of the state that is antithetical to their own in nearly every way. Liberals have learned to live with the tragedy of ruling over the Palestinian people because there was no alternative, no credible Palestinian peace partner; but how to live with that moral anguish if the occupation becomes irreversible by our own hand? And how to live with the permanent domination over another people even as our democratic institutions are threatened? And how to live with the threat to our democracy even as the growing ultra-Orthodox population becomes an increasing financial burden?

A new government has the obligation to set its own agenda but it has no right to recreate the country so profoundly that it effectively disenfranchises whole parts of its population. The Oslo Process of the 1990s, which the Labor government maintained through a contrived parliamentary majority based on political bribery, was an example of one part of the population trampling on the deepest sensibilities of the other without seeking a national dialogue. Stopping a runaway left was why I voted for Netanyahu when he first ran for prime minister in 1996.

The Netanyahu government of 2023 is the right's Oslo.

No government has the moral authority to dismantle the ethos that holds us together. In their commitment to Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, there was no difference between Menachem Begin and David Ben-Gurion – or for that matter, between Yair Lapid and an earlier incarnation of Netanyahu himself.

The cohering force of this schismatic society is its Zionist majority core, from left to center to right. The nation's two fastest-growing populations – ultra-Orthodox and Arab Israelis – generally don't share the vision of an Israel that is both Jewish and democratic. In tearing apart our Zionist core, Netanyahu is tempting the abyss.

Indifference to or outright contempt for the state is the ideology that holds together key elements of Netanyahu's coalition.

For the ultra-Orthodox, the state's legitimacy is measured solely by the extent of its support for their separatist state-within-a-state. For the ultra-nationalists, whose real concern isn't the state of Israel but the land of Israel, the state's institutions lost their legitimacy during the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, when the state "betrayed" the land.

This is Israel's first post-state government. The open contempt Netanyahu and his Likud MKs displayed over the last year for the Knesset – boycotting its committees and turning plenary sessions into staged scenes of mockery, dispatching thugs to harass the families of rightwing Knesset members who dared join the Bennett-Lapid government – was mere rehearsal for the current assault on the nation's bedrock institutions.

Not even the IDF is beyond their grasp. They're installing Bezalel Smotrich in the Defense Ministry as a counter-minister and intend to transfer authority for appointing the army chief

chaplain from the IDF to the state rabbinate. They plan to tear away the Border Police from IDF authority and hand it to Itamar Ben Gvir, placing the unit that most intimately engages with the Palestinian population under the command of a man who despises moral restraint.

It is hardly coincidence that, aside from Netanyahu, the leaders of the coalition parties either served minimal stints in the IDF or didn't serve at all. (One Israeli Druze Tweeter noted, only half joking, that, excepting Netanyahu, the combined military service of the leaders of the coalition didn't equal the amount of time he spent in basic training.) For Ben Gvir and Smotrich, the IDF has been corrupted by "Western morality," by weakness and defeatism.

The camaraderie at the core of the IDF, allowing Israelis across the political spectrum to serve together, means little to them. That is why MKs from both the far-right Religious Zionism party and the Likud (some of whose MKs have become indistinguishable from those of Religious Zionism), can taunt Yair Golan, former deputy commander of the IDF and now a leftwing politician, as a virtual traitor.

As for Netanyahu: Only a man who on some level has stopped caring for his country could drag its political system through nearly four years of elections just to extricate himself from his legal woes. Only a man who no longer cares about the dignity and good name of Israel could have brought Kahanism into the inner sanctum of Israel's government.

The Meaning of Israel's Democracy

Israeli democracy is a miracle. No other democracy has faced the kind of relentless threats as Israel, moving from war to terrorism, diplomatic isolation and economic boycott. Sometimes successfully, sometimes less so, Israel has maintained a balancing act between security needs and democratic norms, even as it absorbed one wave after another of traumatized refugees from countries with no democratic traditions.

Other societies would have long since broken under the strain. Yet our democratic institutions and ethos have held.

True, Israel is not a paragon of democracy. A nation under permanent siege and caught in a long-term occupation with no safe way out, can't possibly be an objective democratic model.

But Israel is a paragon of the *struggle* for democracy within near-impossible conditions, a laboratory for testing the strength and limits of democracy under extremity.

Far-left anti-Zionists despise Israel's struggle as a whitewashing of its sins, dismissing the relevance of the context in which Israel must navigate. Far-right hyper-Zionists likewise despise the balancing act between security and democratic norms – for preventing Israel from using its power without restraint.

Judaism, though, insists on the primacy of context. The Talmud, after all, is one long argument over circumstance. To judge Israel without considering its challenges is to miss the historic achievement of its democracy, its true value to humanity's democratic experiment.

Yet if Israeli democracy is a miracle, today that is cause less for celebration than anxiety. A miracle is a defiance of the laws of nature and cannot be taken for granted. Instead, it must be constantly nurtured and protected, especially by its leaders. For the first time in Israel's history, our democracy is under threat not from the security situation but from our own government.

The Two Visions of a Jewish State

An understandable fatalism has taken hold among many liberal Israelis. Given the nation's demographic trends, liberal Israel appears headed for permanent minority status. Talk of emigration is growing; secular Israelis describe it – tellingly, in English – as “relocation.” In the past, Israelis have left for economic or professional reasons. Netanyahu is creating the grounds for an emigration of despair.

And yet the Netanyahu government is hardly invulnerable. Polls since the election show growing unease among a substantial minority of Netanyahu voters. According to one poll, 61 percent of Israelis – and crucially, 40 percent of those who voted for coalition parties – are worried for the future of Israeli democracy. Other polls show even larger majorities opposed to a change in the religious status quo and that believe Netanyahu mismanaged coalition negotiations, ceding too much to his partners.

In one poll, Netanyahu's coalition would be down by six seats if elections were held today, restoring the political system to a stalemate. Clearly, the notion that this government is the new and permanent face of Israel is by no means a given.

But to effectively reach and retain wavering voters on the right, the centrist camp needs to understand why many voted for Netanyahu in the first place. The reason goes deeper than his ability to project himself as Mr. Security, the supposedly indispensable leader who alone knows how to maneuver in a dangerous region. That is an old story and is not why Netanyahu won this latest round of elections.

The real reason is that he managed to portray the outgoing coalition as an existential threat to Israel's Jewish identity, and himself as its last line of defense.

While a majority of Israeli Jews are committed to maintaining Israel as both a Jewish and democratic state, if forced to choose between them, most would almost certainly opt for its Jewish identity – because, more than its democratic identity, the survival of Israel depends on maintaining its Jewishness. After all, many democracies have known authoritarian phases and not only continued to exist as nations but eventually recovered their democratic balance. But an Israel stripped of its Jewishness would lose its reason for being, its internal cohesion and the vitality that has enabled it to survive against the odds.

Netanyahu presented voters with that stark – and utterly false – dichotomy between his Jewish camp and his opponents' democratic camp.

Netanyahu's “proof” that the previous government had betrayed the Jewish state was the inclusion of the Islamist Ra'am party – which he called “the Muslim Brotherhood.” In fact,

Netanyahu himself had tried desperately to woo Ra'am, only to be stymied by Smotrich and Ben Gvir.

The participation of an Arab party in the coalition broke the Arab political boycott of joining a "Zionist government" and was a milestone in the integration of Arab Israelis, a historic victory for Zionism. That victory was confirmed when Ra'am leader Mansour Abbas became the first prominent Arab Israeli leader to accept the legitimacy of a Jewish state.

Yet the previous coalition failed to vigorously make its case. That failure was compounded by its inexplicable silence in the face of the biggest lie of the Netanyahu camp: that the government had bribed "the Muslim Brotherhood" with a staggering 53 billion shekels to enter the coalition. (In fact, the coalition allocated two billion shekels over the last year to government ministries to redress the discrimination in government funding of the Arab sector – a policy Netanyahu himself had initiated.)

Left unchallenged, the lie of a government beholden to "the Muslim Brotherhood" became common currency among a large part of the public. In numerous conversations I had with Netanyahu voters over the last year, the 53 billion shekels were invariably invoked as definitive proof that only the right could be trusted to protect Israel's Jewish identity. That lie helped Netanyahu return to power.

Many of those who voted for Netanyahu did so not to support the wholesale dismantling of Israeli institutions but to save Israel as a Jewish state. To win over the ambivalent Netanyahu voters of the post-election polls, then, the political center must vigorously affirm its commitment to a Jewish state.

The opposition's campaign to save democracy will fail so long as substantial parts of the public are convinced that "the left" – Netanyahu's all-purpose term for his opponents, most of whom in fact are centrists – is more committed to Israel's democratic identity than to its Jewishness. Opposing this government in the name of democracy alone, even as Netanyahu is allowed to claim a monopoly on loyalty to Jewishness, will only strengthen his argument that the rival camp cares little for Israel's Jewish identity.

And so, along with defending our democratic institutions from assault, we must challenge the Netanyahu coalition on its own agenda: protecting the nation's Jewish identity.

This election exposed two opposing visions of a Jewish state. For the ultra-Orthodox and the ultra-nationalists, Israel is the state of Judaism – Orthodox Judaism. For classical Zionism, though, Israel was intended to be the state of the Jewish people, without imposing a uniform notion of "authentic" Jewish identity.

The difference is crucial. A *state of Judaism* is bound by pre-modern norms defining membership in the Jewish people and upholds traditional standards for whom we as a people should be. The *state of the Jewish people*, on the other hand, accepts the Jews as they are.

The state of Judaism camp has a compelling argument. After all, for two thousand years, Jews defined themselves through a shared system of rabbinic practices and beliefs. The remarkable

achievement of rabbinic Judaism was to hold us together in the dispersion: A Jew could travel from Poland to Yemen and experience its diverse Jewish communities through a shared religious language.

But religion today not only fails to unite us; it is our primary divide. And so classical Zionism offered a more basic identity to hold us together: shared membership in the Jewish people. "Jew" as the noun prevailing over all its adjectives.

Zionism became the Jewish people's most successful collective response to modernity, accepting without judgment the changes in Jewish identity brought about by two centuries of upheaval in Jewish life. Zionism's post-halakhic definition of Jewish belonging is embodied in the "grandchild clause" of the Law of Return – which parts of this coalition are determined to amend.

This is not a strictly religious-secular divide. There are Orthodox Israelis for whom Jewish unity is a prime religious value and so accept the minimal definition of peoplehood as our shared foundation. And while they are bound to a halakhic definition of Jewishness, they support more liberal standards for converting non-halakhic Israelis.

Here is where the Netanyahu government is most vulnerable. Polls repeatedly affirm that a strong majority of Israelis identify with the classical Zionist understanding of a Jewish state, not the definition promoted by Netanyahu's coalition. Netanyahu hasn't only betrayed democracy but the vision of a Jewish state he himself once championed.

The question the centrist camp must present to the Israeli public, then, is this: Should peoplehood or Halakhah define the Jewishness of the state? Framed that way, a decisive majority will side with the center. In salvaging the classical Zionist vision of a Jewish state, we can help save Israeli democracy.

Forty Years

Forty years is a biblical generation, a time of reckoning. My response to the inevitable question is: No, not for a moment do I regret tying my life to the state of Israel. Even knowing what I do today, I wouldn't hesitate to get on that El Al plane with a one-way ticket.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, the summer of '82 reinforces my faith in the future of Israel.

The divide that summer wasn't just over Lebanon but also ethnic and religious, the convergence of Israel's multiple schisms on the fault line of the war. Eastern Jew against Western Jew, religious against secular, left against right. The abyss in Israeli society that Lebanon had exposed tended to position secular liberal Ashkenazim against traditionalist right-wing Mizrahim. The overlapping schisms, many Israelis feared, could lead to civil war.

Meanwhile, the economy was unraveling, with inflation rising over 400 percent. Immigration was at a nadir. When I landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, I waited hours for a representative of the Jewish Agency to bother showing up and process me.

If you had frozen the frame to the summer of '82, you might have reasonably concluded that Israel was on its way to becoming a failed state. And yet that was not the assumption of the Israelis I encountered. We've been through worse, people said. The most useful Hebrew phrase I learned was: *Gam zeh ya'avur*, this too will pass.

From the perspective of forty years, what is most astonishing is how every one of those crises, which seemed at the time existential and insoluble, has either been substantially eased or vanished altogether. When we go to war today, we are united. According to the OECD, start-up nation was the fourth most successful economy in 2022. Immigration is thriving. And despite persisting tensions and grievances, marriage across ethnic communities is gradually healing the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi divide.

Each of those achievements can be undone. One set of existential threats has been replaced with another. But that is the nature of life in Israel.

Over the last four decades, I've lived through at least four distinct Israels. The Israel of the 1980s struggled against the unraveling of its unity, its economy, its most basic assumptions of how it defends itself. The Israel of the '90s absorbed its largest-ever wave of immigrants and fully entered the modern world. The Israel of the early 2000s, the terrible years of the suicide bombings, learned to cope with the transformation of the home front into the actual front.

In the last year, the Israeli rollercoaster has taken an especially wild turn. We've gone from an astonishingly diverse coalition that modeled Israel's ability to transcend its divisions to our most uniform and intolerant government.

What these last forty years have taught me is to never freeze the frame and conclude: This is Israel. Sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, Israeli reality is invariably fluid. Just when you think you understand the country, along comes a massive and unexpected wave of immigration, a war on one of our borders, a diplomatic breakthrough with the Arab world.

The Israeli ethos I learned as an immigrant is to avoid both wishful thinking and despair. Israelis don't tell themselves comforting stories: If you think things are bad, they're probably worse. It is tempting to downplay the severity of this moment, assure ourselves that somehow the old Netanyahu will reemerge, that power and responsibility will temper the ultra-right. But lulling our capacity for outrage is as dangerous as surrendering to despair. Neither is a basis for resilience.

Like so many of us, I am heartbroken by our self-inflicted wound, this unnecessary trauma, and deeply afraid of the consequences. But I believe that the sanity, the decency of Israel will endure. I've seen the radical fluidity of the Israeli story play out far too often to conclude that it's over. As a veteran Israeli, I too now have my store of historical reference points, traumatic events we overcame.

This coalition, united only by hatred and vengeance toward internal enemies, real or imagined, cannot possibly cope with the threats facing Israel. Sooner or later the coalition will unravel. The nature of hatred and greed is to turn against itself. The only question, as always, is the price.

Diaspora Jews are facing their own moment of truth. Some Jews whose connection to Israel has been wavering will be further alienated; some may give up on the relationship altogether.

But when someone you love is in danger, you draw closer, even if the threat is self-inflicted. Israel 1982 helped teach me the meaning of love. If Israel was beginning to waver under relentless siege, if the tightrope walker was finally losing his balance, my place was at the fall.

Though I didn't realize it then, joining the Israeli story at one of its lowest moments was a gift. However the story turned out, I was in it for the duration. To turn away from Israel was to evade responsibility for my moment in Jewish time.

Liberal Diaspora Jews need to seek out centrist Zionist forces in Israel that are determined to save our democracy, maintain Israel's heroic struggle for moral balance in adversity. We need Diaspora Jews as partners in that struggle.

Those who love Israel, who know a third destruction of Jewish sovereignty would be a decisive blow from which we as a people may not recover, are unconditionally committed to playing out this story. In honor and dishonor, whether Israel makes us proud or ashamed. When heroic commandos rescue hostages at Entebbe, and when a cowardly prime minister holds the state hostage to his own needs and ambitions.