Chapter One

THE STATE THAT REINVENTED HOPE

O mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel.

They say, "Our bones are dried up, *our hope is lost*; we are doomed."

—Ezekiel 37:11

Our hope is not yet lost,

The hope of two thousand years, To be a free people in our land,

—"*Hatikvah*," Israel's national anthem

An unspoken Rorschach test is unfolding across the world today, with young Jews both in Israel and in the Diaspora. Asked to name the first thing that they associate with the word "Israel," many of these young people, and even some who are older, immediately conjure up images and words such as "Palestinians." Or "war." Conflict. Apartheid. Occupation. Checkpoints. Refugees. Intifada. Bombings. Danger. The images are increasingly negative, and for many, there is often a considerable sense of embarrassment, or shame, when they think about Israel.

This, of course, was not always the case. Not terribly long ago, among American Jews, and among many non-Jewish Americans, mention of Israel evoked images such as "democracy." The Little Engine That Could. Scrappy. Ally. Beacon of freedom. Recovery. Democracy. Miracle. Pride.

The transformation in the world's perception of Israel has been rapid, and massive. A recent study asked American Jews whether the destruction of Israel would be a personal tragedy for them. The study, we should note, asked about the *destruction* of Israel, not its gradual disappearance, or the slow withering away of the state. The study asked about a cataclysmic disappearance, and with it, presumably, a good portion of the six million Jews (itself a highly ironic number) who now dwell there. Among Jewish Americans sixty-five years of age and older, more than 80% said that Israel's destruction would, indeed, be a personal tragedy for them. But amazingly, among those aged thirty-five and younger, a full 50% said that it would not.

In many ways, this is not difficult to understand. This younger generation of Jews, both in Israel and beyond, came of age when the Shoah was no longer a recent memory, when the existence of the State of Israel seemed as natural as the rising of the sun. Like their Israeli counterparts, they have no recollection of the United Nations vote on November 29, 1947, nor any recall of the War of Independence in which survival hung in the balance for months. Today's young Americans, Jewish and not, have no memory of Israeli food rationing during the early 1950s, when there literally wasn't enough to eat in Israel. They didn't experience the *hamtanah* before the Six Day War, when Israel's very fate, and that of its population, was in question. Many of the young people unknowingly participating in this Rorschach test came of age long after the Yom Kippur War, when hundreds of Syrian tanks, virtually unopposed, were poised to slice through Israeli defenses but for some unknown reason turned around and retreated.

The first major memory that this generation has of Israel is not of 1947, 1948, 1956, 1967, or 1973, but of the emergence of organized Palestinian nationalism, and the Palestinians' extraordinarily effective use of a combination of terrorism and the international media to press

their case. This generation can say very little about why the Jews might need a state, or why Jewish statehood might be legitimate. These people came of age during the Intifada, when Palestinians began to use violence to press their demands for an end to Israel's occupation and demanded the same sovereignty that the Jews had once wanted.

By the 1980s, the Palestinian demands sounded reasonable. They echoed the rhetoric of civil-rights advocates in America, of opponents of apartheid in South Africa, and of seekers of freedom across the globe. They seemed akin to the aspirations of Tibetans under Chinese domination, Chechnyans under Russia, and Basques under Spain. Indeed, many Israelis couldn't help but notice that the Palestinians were using much of the rhetoric that the Jews themselves had used prior to 1948. The Palestinians, in many ways, were the new Jews.

Young American and Israeli Jews had no idea how to respond. Jews as an "occupying power" sounded ugly and humiliating, not something of which these kids could be proud. If the Jews had a state, why couldn't the Palestinians? If Israeli soldiers were really preventing pregnant Palestinian women in labor from getting to hospitals by stopping them at roadblocks, how could these students *not* feel embarrassed?

How the occupation started, what security issues had led to the roadblocks, or what devastation Palestinian terrorism had wrought in Israeli society, this younger generation often did not know. No one told them, and they did not ask. They simply knew that the status quo had to end and that until it did, Israel would be a source of shame.

A similar development is unfolding inside Israel itself. A younger generation of Israelis, distanced not only from the Shoah but from the heady, ideologically impassioned decades of Israel's early years, has also grown tired of the occupation. They have wearied of manning those checkpoints, of being described by the international community in terms formerly reserved for Israel's enemies. They have watched generation after generation being drafted, paying a horrific cost in life and limb, all for a conflict that seems to have no solution. And when asked why Israel should exist, why things wouldn't be much simpler without the Jewish state, even many young Israelis are increasingly uncertain how to respond.

Like their American counterparts, these Israelis also know very little of their own history. But unlike the young Americans, the Israelis see Palestinian suffering from very close, and for many, there is simply no way to deny the horrific conditions, poverty, and fear of many Palestinian civilians, or Israel's role in at least part of their despondency. That fact, coupled with these young Jews' inability to say anything particularly coherent about why the Jews might need a state, means that they focus only on the evils of Israeli behavior and the suffering of the Palestinians, a conversation from which they never emerge feeling very good about who they are, or what their country is.

If Israel is to survive, this has to change. Israel's citizens and its supporters simply must be able to say something coherent about why the Jews need a state. What did the early Zionists believe that sovereignty would do for the Jewish people? What new ideas does Zionism need, now that a century has passed since Theodor Herzl convened the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897? If they remain unable to answer these questions, Jews will not commit to the project called Israel. Israelis will not commit to military service, or even to spending their adult lives in Israel. Without some sense that Zionism is *about* something, the State of Israel will inevitably begin to falter.

Thus questions about why Israel matters, about why the Jews want and need a state, and about what the state was supposed to do to transform the Jewish people, could not be more critical at precisely this hour.

In the neighborhood in Baltimore where I grew up, there were no streets named for dates. We had street names like Pimlico Road, Greenspring Avenue, and Woodvalley Drive, but nothing I can recall that contained a date.

Not far from our apartment in Jerusalem, though, and adjacent to the high school we chose for our sons, there's a street named "The Twenty-ninth of November." There's no year in the street name; none is needed. When the street was named, everyone in Jerusalem and throughout Israel knew what *kaf tet be-November* represented. The year was 1947, the date of the UN vote to divide British-ruled

Mandatory Palestine into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. It was the date that made the project called Israel possible.

It was a day of voting, but of images, too. Of Jews huddled around radios the world over, holding their breath, waiting to see if perhaps the twentieth century might finally bear some better tidings for the Jews. Of the cheering and the crying when the vote was over. Of the dancing in the streets of Tel Aviv when the roll call had been completed. Of the sense that something had changed, that the tide had shifted. Of the hope that out of the ashes of Europe something positive might still arise.

Hope. That is what the State of Israel has represented to Jews ever since its creation. It was hope that Israel restored to the Jews; and it is hope that would be utterly lost if Israel ever succumbed.

Amos Oz, perhaps Israel's greatest novelist and one of its most important public intellectuals, captures that night in 1947 better than anyone I know. He describes his family listening to the radio, following the roll call vote:

> At that the voice suddenly stopped, and an otherworldly silence descended and froze the scene, a terrified, panic-stricken silence, a silence of hundreds of people holding their breath, such as I have never heard in my life either before or after that night.

Then Oz describes the reaction after the vote:

> Our faraway street on the edge of Kerem Avraham in northern Jerusalem . . . roared all at once in a first terrifying shout that tore through the darkness and the buildings and trees, piercing itself, not a shout of joy, nothing like the shouts of spectators in sports grounds or excited rioting crowds, perhaps more like a scream of horror and bewilderment, a cataclysmic shout, a shout that could shift rocks, that could freeze your blood, as though all the dead who had ever died here and all those still to die had received a brief window to shout, and the next moment the scream of horror was replaced by

> roars of joy and a medley of hoarse cries and "The Jewish People Lives."

"The Jewish People lives." Whether or not most Jews are conscious of it, this is the implicit message of the State of Israel. Many do not hear it because the mere notion that a state can have a message seems counterintuitive. But strange as the idea may sound to the contemporary ear, hope, and an insistence that "the Jewish People lives," are precisely the point of the Jewish state. Indeed, the naturalness with which contemporary Jews think about a Jewish future is due in no small measure to that message of the Jewish state. Later Oz describes how after a night of singing and celebrating, his usually reserved father, now drenched in sweat from the dancing, climbed into bed with him, as he'd never done before. And his father told him of how his own father had been tormented by Christian hooligans in Europe, and how there was nothing he could do.

> My father told me under my blanket in the early hours of November 30, 1947, "Bullies may well bother you in the street or at school someday. They may do it precisely because you are a bit like me. But from now on, from the moment we have our own state, you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so- and so-s. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here. Forever."

His father's tears and tenderness emerged from a sense that history was changing, that somehow, because the Jews were going to have a state, their lives would never be the same. Hope, it now seemed possible, could prevail over despair.

Though Oz's own story has nothing at all to do with the Shoah, there's no way to make sense of the euphoria in Jewish communities across the world that night without recalling that the vote at the United Nations took place just less than three years after the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945. The cloud of the destruction of European Jewry still hung heavily over Jewish life across the globe. The creation of the Jewish state, the first major positive turn in years,

heralded, Jews hoped, an end to what had been one of the worst centuries in all of Jewish history. They knew that virtually the entire world had conspired either to annihilate the Jews or to permit their annihilation, all the while pretending to be aghast. After all, FDR had closed the shores of the United States to Jewish refugees, as had Canada, and the United States had failed to allocate even one bombing mission to the railroad tracks leading to Auschwitz. The British, for their own internal reasons, had also prevented Jews who were fleeing Hitler from entering Palestine. Now the creation of a Jewish state suggested that life might still triumph and years of encroaching extinction might have ended.

Israel provided hope when it seemed that hope had died.

And ever since then, Israel has represented for Jews the triumph of life over death, of hope over despair, of the possibility of a future when a decimated past seemed to cloud every view. Indeed, *that* is the key notion at the core of Israel's "thick" national culture (a concept I will discuss in chapter eight), at the center of a national mythology that is communicated in a myriad of ways. Israel—the state that restored hope, that insisted on the possibility of a future, that audaciously claimed that Hitler had not won.

For two thousand years prior to the creation of the State of Israel, the complex array of holidays that had long been at the core of the Jewish calendar had not changed. None had been removed. None had been added. The calendar—one of the most defining characteristics of Jewish communal life—had endured almost entirely unaltered for twenty centuries.

Then Israel was born. Almost as soon as the country was created, three additional holidays were added to the calendar. The first to appear in the cycle as it now exists is Yom Ha-Shoah, established in 1959 to commemorate the six million Jews who had been murdered in the Nazi genocide just a decade earlier. The second, which falls a week later, is Yom Ha-Zikaron, Israel's equivalent of Memorial Day. Set on this date in 1951 and codified into law in 1963, Yom Ha-Zikaron is the day on which the state remembers the soldiers it lost

during the numerous military campaigns the country has endured. The third, which falls the day after Yom Ha-Zikaron, is Yom Ha-Atzma'ut, or Independence Day.

Understanding how those holidays fall, and how they are celebrated, is key to understanding how the founders of Israel, as well as many of its citizens, understood the very purpose of creating a Jewish state. Though Yom Ha-Shoah and Yom Ha-Zikaron fall a week apart and commemorate radically different memories, what is most significant for understanding how they communicate Israel's "message" is that that they are marked with astonishingly similar rituals.

On the surface, it would be difficult to imagine two days more different from each other. One is designed to remember the powerless, innocent victims of the Shoah, while the other is observed in memory of those who fell in Israel's battles. One is about Europe, the other about home. One is about passivity, the other about taking one's destiny into one's own hands. One is about powerlessness, the other about military might.

Yet despite these differences, similarities abound. On both days, air-raid sirens sound throughout the country, the moaning wail of the sirens bringing the entire country to a standstill. On the highways, cars come to a stop and drivers stand at attention outside their vehicles. In restaurants, waiters and waitresses stand immobile, food in hand, for the full two minutes of the siren, waiting for it to cease before moving on to their customers. On the streets, people stop and stand, as if cast in stone. In classes, students snap to attention and teachers cease their speaking; and even in doctors' offices and hospitals, all nonessential activity is suspended. For a moment, the country is still. Israeli life freezes, and is silent.

Silence, the country has decided, is the only appropriate way to mark the searing ache that will not heal, and that in some ways should not heal. It is, quite clearly, an intentional reflection of the biblical Aaron's reaction when his two sons were killed by God, about which the Torah remarks, with utter simplicity, "And Aaron was silent" (Leviticus 10:3). Aaron's pain was apparently so overwhelming that he could not respond. That is how Israelis mark the memory of the

six million exterminated European Jews, and the approximately twenty-five thousand young Jews (and some non-Jews as well) who have since fallen in battle defending the Jewish state. Silence, both the Jewish and the Israeli traditions insist, is the only way to respond to pain so searing that no words could ever suffice.

And then, the day after Yom Ha-Zikaron, comes Yom Ha-Atzma'ut. Fireworks. Wine and beer. Music and dancing. Cultural performances throughout the country. Flags waving from car windows, and flags held aloft in the hands of children young and old. Israelis leave the cemeteries they visit on Memorial Day, and head to parties. The transition, the movement from the unspeakable pain of loss to an almost giddy celebration of independence, is agonizing, virtually impossible; but people force themselves to make it. For they understand the point of these holidays. The Jewish nation-state simply had to create them in order to proclaim the very point of its existence: Israel is about restoring hope at just the moment when it seemed that hope had perished. Somehow, not to force oneself to leave the cemetery and join the party would be to deny the very essence of what Jewish statehood has created.

The message that the Jewish state is about the triumph of possibility over devastation, of life over death, permeates Israel's national culture. Look carefully enough, and it appears virtually everywhere. It's in the architecture. It's a constant theme of Israeli literature. Israeli stamps have been created with that theme. Even the annual field trips that Israeli children take to different parts of the country are celebrations of home, of possibility and the end of landlessness. That message figures prominently in the national traditions of music and dance.

Yad Vashem, Israel's national memorial and museum to the victims of the Shoah and the heroes of the resistance, is a case in point. Adorning the cement arch at the entrance to the museum is a biblical verse. It is the promise of hope following Ezekiel's famous Vision of the Dry Bones, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and reads: "I will put My breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you

upon your own soil" (Ezekiel 37:14). The promise of redemption. The reassurance that follows desperation. And even in this national museum and memorial, an echo of "*Hatikvah*"—("The Hope")—Israel's national anthem. Hope, the museum of the Shoah reminds the visitor, is still possible.

And then, as visitors to the site make their way to the museum itself, they find themselves almost underground. In a colossal building constructed of a grayish concrete, where the walls meet at the ceiling to form a giant triangular tunnel that twists and turns, they meander their way through the exhibit, with no choice as to where to head (an obvious message about the people whose demise they are memorializing). Gone is their sense of direction, any notion of start and finish, an architectural approximation of the total and unrelenting disorientation that the victims must have felt.

But just as it all gets too unbearable, as the horror and devastation threaten to consume the visitor, the museum ends. As the exhibit comes to a close, the walls of the museum spread apart at the top, and the visitor is ushered out onto a balcony overlooking the forest surrounding Jerusalem. Suddenly the verdant green view is what overwhelms, in a stunning, chilling contrast to the darkness from which the visitor has just emerged. Here claustrophobia gives way to space. An ominous ceiling opens up heavenward. Cement recedes and forests take its place. The once oppressive gray is now replaced by green. Death is replaced by nature. Europe is replaced by Israel. Exile is replaced by statehood, landlessness by home. And hell is replaced by hope.

Throughout Israeli culture, exhaustion and emptiness are metaphorically replaced by possibility. In the minds of Israelis, the National Water Carrier project, a vast system of pumps, aqueducts, and reservoirs that carried water from the Sea of Galilee to the rest of the country, was no ordinary system of pipes and pumps. It was, for all intents and purposes, about expanding the habitable borders of the country. "Making the desert bloom," one of the early mottos of the state, was about more than agriculture. It was about bringing water to desert, people to barrenness, vegetation to lifeless sand, life to death.

Only Israelis consumed with the message of hope that their state embodied could have fallen in love with a song about a sprinkler. When the National Water Carrier project was completed in the 1950s, Shoshana Damari, the grand dame of Israeli national folk song, wrote and recorded "*Hora Mamtera*" (The Sprinkler Dance), which became a national classic.

It's a brief song, this ode to a sprinkler, and simple. But it sounds more like a military march by John Philip Sousa than a song about water and nature. And that, of course, is no accident. For water and nature were inseparable from the military accomplishments—they were both about hope when there should have been none, life where death seemed all but omnipresent.

To be sure, today's Israeli teenagers grimace at the kitsch, at the datedness of the black-and-white grainy film showing circle upon circle of dancers bobbing to the beat of Shoshana Damari's throaty rendition of the song. Some of that is understandable; it's inevitable with the passage of time. This is the age of iPods, Internet, and a global culture of which Israeli teenagers are part no less than teenagers anywhere else; those days of completely unself-conscious national celebration are gone, and they cannot be restored.

But not everyone has given up. Despite Israel's often steamrolling modernity, there are artists and intellectuals who understand what is being lost, who attempt to remind their readers, their viewers, and their listeners how profound were the accomplishments of that former era. Dudu Elharar's 1983 recording of "*Bo Shir Ivri*" (Come, Hebrew Song) is a classic example. Long after the cynicism had begun to settle in, the song beckoned the Hebrew song to return:

> Come, Hebrew song, from the ravine, from the valley
> And bring with you the taste of the old melody.
> In the south the clod of earth has bloomed, in the north the snow has melted
> Return, Hebrew song, don't be bashful.

The song goes on to note all the ways in which Israel has changed. Consciously evoking the naïveté of earlier genres of Israeli song, the

lyrics point out that the country has built towns, and there are roads. And on the roads there are cars, and in the cars, everyone has a radio that "sings." The country sings "in all languages," the lyrics say. But then, on a hopeful note with a melody that is almost erotic, that sounds more like a love song than an ode to a language, the song concludes:

> But the Hebrew song, it's still here, it still persists
> It simply doesn't give up.

Israel is still about hope. There *is* some awareness of what has been lost, and many Israelis are seeking ways of recovering the innocence and the passion of the past. Numerous enduring echoes of that earlier era remain, and even many of today's Israeli children, while they may no longer dance to the beat of "*Hora Mamtera*," seem to have intuited what the Zionist project was meant to convey. Thankfully, the sense of rebirth and of healing still pulses in portions of Israeli life, and often when it is least expected, it shapes a great deal about how Israeli youth respond to the world around them.

My daughter was about seventeen years old when she went with her high school class to Poland. It was the standard Israeli Poland trip, a combination of seeing the places in which Jewish life had thrived for centuries and visiting the unspeakably awful camps where it had all been annihilated in the space of a few years.

Like most of the students who go on these trips, she had a very powerful experience. At the assembly that the girls conducted a few weeks after their return, I heard one story that has stuck with me ever since. While they were in Poland, the girls recounted that evening, one of their teachers told them a story about a previous class that had gone from the same school fourteen years earlier. One day while in Krakow, those girls—now adult women, of course—noticed a young man selling "Jew dolls" made to look like traditional Jews. Some of the girls noticed that the "books" that these dolls were holding looked remarkably authentic. The more closely the girls looked at these books, the

more convinced they became that these "books" had been cut from a real Torah scroll.

They asked the doll-maker where he'd gotten the calligraphed parchment, and he told them that his uncle had a big scroll of it in the nearby town, Limanova. Asked where the uncle had gotten the scroll, he told them that during the war, it had been in the house of a Jew, and his uncle had taken it after the Jew disappeared. "Could they see it?" they wanted to know. He agreed to bring it back the next day.

The next day, he showed them what was left: Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus. The two other books, apparently, had been cut up for the dolls. The girls instinctively knew what they had to do. They pooled their relatively limited pocket money and bought the Torah from the man for whatever they had managed to scrounge together.

They carried the now destroyed and unusable Torah with them for the remainder of their trip. As the time to depart Poland grew closer, however, they were faced with a dilemma. All Jewish property from before the war now belonged to the state, and removing the Torah from Poland was against the law. If Israeli teenagers were caught smuggling Polish government property, matters would be most unpleasant.

They talked it over, the teacher reported now many years later, and decided to smuggle the Torah out of Poland and to bring it home to Jerusalem.

At the airport, however, each girl was required to pass her bags through the X-ray machine. The first girl in line, when she was told to put her bags on the belt, passed the Torah to the next girl in line. When that girl was told to do the same thing, she surreptitiously passed it to the girl behind her, and so forth. For the next few minutes, the Torah silently made its way back down the line, until it seemed that they were not going to get it out.

And then the belt broke. The machine simply quit. The Polish authorities, too concerned with fixing the belt to inspect all the bags being brought through, just ushered the remaining girls by, the Torah included. The girls brought the Torah to a place in Jerusalem where such scrolls are repaired, but because this work is exceedingly

expensive, there was no money to fix the scroll. With time, the girls graduated. They went on to the army or National Service, and then to university. Then followed marriage, children, and careers. The Torah languished unrepaired.

Fourteen years later, my daughter's senior class went to Poland. And when they heard the story of the Torah, they resolved to raise the money to restore it. Upon their return, they got to work. They raised the money, and the Torah was fixed over many months. A short time later, it was danced into its new home in the school's auditorium/synagogue. During the ceremony that these young women created to mark the homecoming of this Torah scroll, as I listened to the story, I asked myself what it was that had gotten those girls to smuggle the Torah back to Israel. What possessed them to violate Polish law, perhaps at considerable personal risk, to try to bring that Torah home? Why would the teachers accompanying them on the trip allow them to do it? Why did they all, teachers and students alike, understand that the Torah simply had to be brought home? And why did my daughter's class understand that now that the Torah was in Israel, it simply *had* to be repaired and used, that it could no longer languish in storage?

It was, I believe, because on some level they've intuited that Israel is about life, about recovery. Leaving a Torah in Poland, to be cut up by a doll-maker, would have been to deny the possibility of the redemption of the Jewish life that had once existed there. The Torah, for these religious girls, represented that life, now mostly extinguished. And the Torah, eaten away by the doll-maker so that only two-thirds of it remained, simply needed to be repaired. These girls, raised and educated in Israel, understood the message of repair, of recovery, of healing. The Torah had to come home. It needed to be brought back to life.

I watched my daughter, Talia, watching the speakers. I couldn't get a seat anywhere near her, but I could see her—listening intently, her eyes, at certain moments, brimming with tears. As we left the ceremony, I got a close look at the *parochet* (the cloth covering at the front of the ark where the Torah was to be kept) and saw that there were some verses embroidered on it. In exquisite lettering, embroidered with a love that was palpable, were the famous verses

from Jeremiah 31:15–16 that had been chosen to welcome the Torah home:

> *Ki yesh sachar li-fe'ulateikh,*
> *Ve-yesh tikvah la-acharitekh*
> *Ve-shavu vanim li-gvulam*
>
> There is reward for your labor
> And there is hope for your future
> Your children shall return to their country.

Here it was again: the reminder that "reward for your labor," and more important, that "hope for your future" is what Israel is all about. Israel has done for the Jewish people what these girls did for the Torah scroll. Like that Torah, the Jewish people was brought home, broken and tattered, but at least now protected. And then, also like that Torah, the Jewish people could be healed. It would take time and it would not be easy, but the Torah would be danced back into a sanctuary, and the Jews, now ensconced in their own national sanctuary, would begin to thrive once again.

These young women understood that. Though they are in many ways just like American or European girls their age, Zionism's essential message still resonates with them. Even this generation, or at least parts of it, understands that at its core, Israel is about Jewish recovery, Jewish flourishing, and the possibility of a vital Jewish future.

When Avi, our next child, went to Poland three years later with his high school class, he saw similar places. And he came back equally moved. A few days after his return, he and I were sitting in his room, where he'd just transferred the pictures from his digital camera onto his computer. I sat at his side, and we went through the pictures, one by one, as he told me about the places he'd seen. Soon we came to a picture of someone I didn't recognize. "Where was this taken?" I asked.

"Majdanek," he said, referring to the concentration camp near Lublin, in eastern Poland.

"And who's that?" I asked him, pointing to the one person in the picture.

He laughed. "Funny," he said. But when he realized that I really didn't know who it was, he looked at me strangely and said, "That's me, Abba."

It was, I realized, my son. Part of the reason I didn't recognize him was that it was cold when they were in Poland, and he was wearing a black knitted ski cap pulled down almost to his eyebrows. But it was more than that. The usual glimmer of his eyes and his almost always shining visage were completely gone. Coming out of the concentration camp, his eyes were hollow, his stare vacant, his mind obviously still trying to make sense of that which is, ultimately, utterly incomprehensible.

And in his parka, bundled against the cold, he stared not at the camera but beyond it, hugging an Israeli flag to his chest. It reminded me of him as a toddler, hugging his stuffed animals to his shoulder as he went to sleep at night, the need for some comfort and reassurance paramount as the day was ending.

He was much older in this picture, almost an adult, and there he was, hugging something to himself, still needing reassurance. This time, it wasn't his stuffed tiger but an Israeli flag on a pole, held tightly against his chest as he struggled forward, even in the face of what he'd seen. He was going to return home in a few days, that flag seemed to remind him—to a place created in large measure because of this, to a place designed to guarantee that it couldn't happen again, to a place that insisted that there had to be a future even after that darkness.

I realized, looking at that photo, that he, too, had come to understand very well what Israel's founders had once hoped the mere existence of their new state would convey. Here was a young Israeli, "ingathered from the Diaspora," staring out of a place of darkness and utter despair, grasping his adopted flag, knowing that in a matter of days he'd head back home to the one place that had been created to ensure that Majdanek would be part of the Jewish past and never of its future.

It is not only Israelis who are touched by the power of this message. Each visit of the now more than one hundred thousand students who

have been brought to Israel on a program called "Taglit-Birthright Israel" is testimony to the way in which Israel's vitality speaks even to those who are not its citizens. In 2000, two major American Jewish philanthropists, in cooperation with other donors and the State of Israel, inaugurated "Birthright Israel" in the hopes of bringing thousands of Jewish college students and young adults to Israel for a free ten-day trip. The purpose of the trip, which was inspired by an idea initially proposed by Israeli politician Yossi Beilin, was to counteract the declining indicators of Jewish identity among young adults in the Diaspora. Bring them to Israel, the argument went, show them the vitality of Jewish life in the Jewish state, and they'll feel something that they won't ever want to abandon.

Though Birthright broke almost every rule in the book for what constituted serious educational planning, it worked. Apathy did evaporate. Decades of disengagement did disappear. Jewish college students suddenly pledged themselves to giving Jewish commitment priority in their lives, and spoke openly and unabashedly about how the experience had changed much of who they wanted to be. They encouraged their friends to go to Israel. In time, some of them married each other. By 2007 more than 120,000 students had participated, and a new philanthropist had entered the picture, contributing an additional $60 million to ensure the program's future.

Many leading educators were dumbfounded. Why did Birthright work? What *happened* to these people, they wanted to know. How could one explain the impact of ten days of simply touring a country?

Part of the power of the experience stemmed from the fact that their Jewishness no longer set them apart. When they landed at Ben-Gurion Airport, it was the very first time they experienced that being Jewish was the norm, that the majority of the people they were encountering were Jews. There were soldiers, but they, too, were Jewish. Some wore kippot, some didn't. Some had white skin, and others were dark, of Ethiopian descent. Some were men, while others were women. And suddenly, these visiting students intuited two profoundly important lessons: there is no one model of what it means to be a Jew, and being Jewish does not have to mean being peripheral or "other."

The kippah was no longer that thing that you had to wear in Temple on the High Holidays but had to remember to take off before

you left the building so you didn't stick out as "different" on the streets of American suburbia. Hebrew, no longer the arcane language that they scarcely learned in Hebrew school and didn't understand at the Passover seder, was everywhere. The signs for "Customs" and "Police" and "Rest Rooms" were all in Hebrew (and in English, of course, as in any major international airport).

But what worked about Birthright was more than not being different. The students would gather their bags, get on a bus, and head for Jerusalem. If the guide on the bus was good, she or he would point out the caves where the Maccabees had fought off the Greeks thousands of years earlier, and the hills, right along the highway, where Jewish troops battled Arab soldiers for control of the road leading to Jerusalem in the 1948 War of Independence. They'd be shown the burnt-out but still carefully preserved carcasses of the convoy trucks that had not made it through. And these students would suddenly feel something that they couldn't articulate. It was just a road, that highway, but it was a road that told a story. It told *their* story.

Roads that evoke *feeling* and a sense of belonging—that, too, was something that most of these Birthright participants had never experienced before.

They'd be taken to the Old City, and instead of a seeing a site discussed incessantly in the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* as the focus of a bitter international dispute, they would see the remnants of an ancient home. They would stand at the very site to which thousands upon thousands of Jews, millennia ago, had walked and hiked in order to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. In the north, hiking the Golan Heights, they would encounter both natural beauty and the burnt-out tanks that are abiding testimony to what people like them—Jews, like them, and people exactly their age—gave up so that the little country in which they now found themselves could survive.

If in the minds of the Birthright college students "Jewish" had too often been associated with the Shoah, with their being told that they had an obligation to commit to Jewish life so as not to give Hitler a posthumous victory, "Jewish" suddenly meant something very different. In Israel, they intuited, "Jewish" meant "alive," "thriving," "reborn." In Israel, they suddenly discovered that being Jewish meant

that they were part of a narrative, a history, a national struggle, much larger and much more profound than their own lives.

And implicitly, many of them asked themselves, "What would *I* give everything for? Is there anything *I* believe in that is more important than I am?" They were part of something grand, panoramic, and multifaceted, these young Jews discovered. And in thousands of cases, they decided that no matter what else they did, they weren't going to walk away from it all.

This commitment to rebirth and to regeneration is key to understanding Israel's almost inexplicable drive to settle every Jew who came to its borders.

More than 500,000 Jews fled the Nazis and came to Jewish Palestine, and then Israel. In the early years of the state, some 750,000 Jews were expelled from Muslim countries in North Africa and were absorbed by Israel (unlike a similar number of Palestinian refugees, by the way, who were never integrated by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, or Egypt; those countries decided to keep them as refugees so that they could be pawns in future negotiations with Israel). Still later, Israel took in approximately 1,000,000 Jews (and non-Jews) from the Soviet Union. Throughout, this commitment to welcoming immigrants was another reflection of the desire to create something from nothing, to build a future with those who seemingly had none.

It goes without saying that Israel was clearly also seeking to increase its population. But Israel's strategy was always about more than mere demography. These immigrants, many of whom were poor and illiterate, were not exactly the ideal profile of population that a young, struggling country might want; yet they were, despite their poverty and illiteracy, critical to the country's attempt to stand for a commitment to Jewish life, above and beyond all else, after what had happened in the twentieth century.

Even with all the inadequacies (in addition to many extraordinary successes) of how Israelis dealt with these immigrants once they arrived, Israelis have always intuited the relationship between immigrant absorption and their country's purpose. There is no other way to

explain the excitement that Israelis felt when hearing the stories of how Caucasian Israeli pilots had landed lumbering, converted C-130 jets on narrow airstrips in the midst of a civil war that was none of Israel's business, just to get Ethiopian Jews to Israel in Operation Solomon.

Operation Solomon brought to Israel people of a different race, a different language, no meaningful exposure to the modern world, and even religious practices that were almost unrecognizable to other Jews. Yet Israelis were beyond proud, giddily excited. Why? Because the effort bespoke the infatuation with saving Jewish life that still pulses through the veins of the Jewish state.

While it is true (though difficult to fathom) that two-thirds of American Jews have not visited Israel, the existence of a Jewish state touches their lives in ways they can hardly begin to appreciate. In the field of Jewish education, there are scarcely any educational leaders who have not spent a significant amount of time in Israel, and those who do visit Israel return to the United States with much of the message of the triumph over despair fully internalized. That message is then transmitted in a variety of ways in educational programs across America. Israel Independence Day parades, Israel programming on college campuses, cultural events, and more all use the foundation of Israel's success as a means of injecting a profound sense of optimism into American Jewish life.

Nor is it an accident that virtually every rabbinic and cantorial training program in the United States requires of its students a year of study in Israel. To be sure, part of that requirement stems from a desire to advance the students' Hebrew fluency and their familiarity with some of the critical issues facing the Jewish world. But the commitment goes deeper than that. Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College and widely regarded as one of American Judaism's most visionary leaders, refused to scale back his school's Israel-year requirement, even when the Palestinian Terror War raged. Despite criticism of his position, Ellenson was unfazed and unrepentant. The nature of "Jewish national rebirth in *Eretz Yisrael*," he consistently argues, is the reason that those students

need to spend significant time in Israel. The image of the Jew as actor, determiner of his or her own destiny, is derivative of Jewish sovereignty.

To all this, we should add the obvious note that were Israel to be destroyed and another six million Jews lost in that process, it is highly unlikely that American Jews could recover. The loss of a *second* round of six million Jews would undoubtedly set American Jews back significantly. The loss of inspiration that Israel's regeneration provides, the sense of guilt that would inevitably accompany Israel's demise, and the impact of a second loss of millions of Jews in the space of a century would almost certainly prove overwhelming and insurmountable. It is highly likely that the American Judaism that remained a generation or two after that loss would be but a faint reflection of what American Jews have created and now enjoy.

Outside Israel and the United States, no statistically significant Jewish communities remain. There is a middle-sized community in France (which is itself very threatened), and all the rest are much smaller. The loss of the Israel and American Jewish communities would thus spell the end for Jewish life as we know it, not only in Israel and North America, but across the globe.

At stake in Israel's survival, then, is the Jewish belief in the possibility of the future. When Israelis, or American Jews, wonder aloud in the face of a world no longer supportive of Israel whether the continued battle to preserve Israel is still worthwhile, there is but one clear question, and one clear answer.

Could the Jewish people survive without the anchor that Israel represents? There's almost no chance.

Yet that's precisely the scenario that may be tested. For despite the hope that Israel has restored, the optimism of yesteryear has begun to fade. We've mentioned the causes briefly, and we'll return to them—the wars that will not cease, the fact that peace seems unattainable, Israel's loss of the Second Lebanon War, successive governments rife with corrupt officials, and what perhaps is most ominous, a generation of young Israelis who are no longer so certain what it is that

they're fighting for, or why the Jewish state might matter enough to be worth sacrificing for. It's an era of increased rates of able-bodied young men avoiding the draft (a 2008 report suggested that seven thousand able-bodied men had avoided the draft in the previous year, and that the annual rate was rising steadily), of Israelis feeling guilty for an occupation that began in a war for their survival that they did not choose. It was easier to be the victims than the oppressors, Israelis lament, forgetting that they only became "occupiers" when they successfully repelled aggression. Wave after wave of disappointment and self-doubt has drained Israel of hope.

In many ways, the loss of Israeli optimism is understandable. Israelis are battle weary, and they feel abandoned. They crave normalcy but see none forthcoming, even on the horizon. They vanquish enemies only to have new ones replace the old. It would be astonishing if all this did not take a toll.

But at the same time, ironically, some of the loss of passion and vision stems from the great success that Israel has been. The unpredictable success of what was a fledgling state only decades ago has so totally erased the collective memory of what Jewish life was like without sovereignty, that many Jews can no longer imagine the Jewish world without a country, without a stage for Jewish peoplehood as we know it today.

There is a danger to this loss of collective memory, for with no memory of what the world was like without Israel, it is all the more difficult for young Jews today to remember how dramatically the Jewish state has transformed Jewish life. Israel has to work to recreate that awareness of how dramatically Jewish sovereignty has altered the Jewish condition, and it must find a way to restore to its citizens the hope and the passion that it once evoked, leading them to defend their state and to see to its thriving.

Otherwise, it is more than hope or passion that will be lost. For what is at stake is not only a country, but the people it was meant to save.