



# **A New Existential War - Part III: Forming a Clear Post-War National Vision Means Returning to the Roots of Zionism**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** On the morning of October 7, 2023, the strategic Israeli security concept collapsed, marking the end of the 30-year era since the Oslo Accords. With the shocking force of an earthquake, a cultural concept that had its roots planted in the dream of peace, and in the illusion that the State of Israel could aspire to become a kind of Denmark, disintegrated completely. For Israel to achieve victory in the war with Hamas, it will have to adapt its security concept to reflect a new and deeper understanding of the enemy's perception of the nature of its struggle with Israel.

In the wake of October 7, the State of Israel, its society, and all its institutions are at a critical crossroads. One path forward demands a thorough investigation and examination of everything that failed on that day so the necessary corrections can be made. The second path directs Israel towards a comprehensive inquiry across all dimensions and urges the formulation of a new and updated national narrative in the face of the existential challenge. The question is, which of the two paths is worth pursuing?

This article is divided into three parts. The first examines the roots of the failure of October 7 and Israel's perception of the struggle on the opposing side. The second describes the ways in which the Israeli security perception needs to evolve to

provide a proper response to the opposing side's perception of the struggle. This, the third, presents the components of the national vision and the principles of action that will ensure the existence of the State of Israel in the face of emerging threats.

### **"Nation of Israel, for what purpose do you live?"**

Despite broad Israeli agreement on the immediate goals of the war as formulated by the cabinet, the debate over its ultimate objectives is intensifying.

This dispute will likely be reflected in the fundamental questions that will be asked post-war, and may also penetrate the discussions of the state inquiry committee that will undoubtedly be established. The committee will naturally address operational and technical questions, the workings of the IDF, General Staff, Southern Command, and Air Force, and regulatory relations between the IDF and the civil leadership. But the depth and scope of this crisis require a comprehensive cultural and spiritual rethinking of how we perceive ourselves and the enemy, focusing on the question of why the enemy fights and what we are fighting for.

Hamas and Hezbollah fight out of religious belief. By contrast, we are not clear on our reasons for uniting to fight wars beyond our desire to safeguard our existence and survival.

A.B. Yehoshua once posed an existential question: "Nation of Israel, for what purpose do you live?" Later, he clarified: "Survival is considered the most prominent aspect of the Jewish people... but it is not survival that is the prominent aspect, but rather how it is done, what its agenda is, what values it holds, and primarily, what its cost is." (A.B. Yehoshua, *Haaretz Books Supplement*, 20.2.2013)

This question must be applied to clarify the central inquiry: Nation of Israel, for what purpose do you fight, and how do you fight?

I am not aware of a framework for a state inquiry committee that would know how to address such questions and critically examine the connections between them and the focal points of failure in the security system. Nevertheless, this inquiry, whether conscious or subconscious, will shed light on the investigation into everything that happened at the outset of the war and everything that will

happen from its conclusion onwards in the context of the ongoing internal struggle in Israel over conflicting dreams.

### **What has Zionism achieved? The imposition of doubt**

The sudden strike by Hamas thrust the Zionist idea back to the dilemma of its earliest days. It prompted an echoing of the doubt cast during Herzl's visit: "You might solve the Jews' problem, but you won't solve the problem of Judaism." On October 7, we were forcefully confronted with the fundamental Zionist question: What do the Jews want in the Land of Israel?

The current war, which has enveloped us all, is intertwined with the anxiety of the cultural war that erupted in Israel last year. The crisis of the Jews, which focuses on the question of physical existence, has become entangled with the crisis of Judaism, which has lost its spiritual path.

As early as 2005, Dan Meron touched upon the Zionist dilemma in his book *Healing for Touching*. A professor of 20<sup>th</sup> century Hebrew literature, Meron cast doubt on the ultimate goal of the Zionist enterprise, questioning what it has truly achieved since its inception:

...[T]he expectation of Zionism that the distancing of Jews from European societies and their concentration in their own country would lead to the disappearance of antisemitism did not materialize. Even the security of Zionism, which was supposed to be able to extricate the Jewish people from existential threats, leading to a new Jewish existential activism, did not come to fruition and may not reach the goal it set for itself...The historical development of Zionism and its success in achieving Jewish statehood have only led to the replacement of one type of existential threat with another.  
(Dan Meron, 2005, *Healing for Touching*, p. 63, translated from the Hebrew)

With these words, Meron raises two challenging questions about the state of Zionism, both of which have been debated since its beginnings.

In one dimension of the Zionist vision, Herzl sought a response to antisemitism. With his visionary breakthrough, he acknowledged that the Jews had not succeeded in finding a solution to the problem of antisemitism even though they

had exhausted every possible avenue, including assimilation. He believed that if the Jews could only gather in their own normal state, where they could be accepted as a nation among nations, a state among nation-states, it would bring an end to antisemitism.

We must ask whether over the hundred years since the beginning of the Zionist effort to gather the Jews in their homeland, Herzl's expectation of the disappearance of antisemitism has been realized. It appears that the opposite has occurred. Antisemitism has emerged in a new form that is more sophisticated, as it is shielded by a kind of vaccine: it is ostensibly not hatred of Jews as Jews, but merely criticism of the State of Israel. Yet fierce antipathy is directed against Jews worldwide whenever they voice complaints about actions that threaten the State of Israel, actions they feel endanger them as well. Jews around the world are thus forbidden to defend Israel or the Jews who live in it or be themselves the victims of antisemitism. The process that was supposed to solve antisemitism has instead generated, over the past two decades, a new and equally dangerous form of it. In this way, Meron argues, the Zionist vision has become caught in a deadlock.

In the second dimension, Zionism sought a response to the problem of the need to physically protect Jews, who have never ceased suffering persecution, pogroms, and other threats around the world. In this dimension as well, Meron raises a concern that has troubled many Israelis. There is a fear that despite Israel's independence and military strength, Zionism has achieved nothing more than to replace one existential problem, like pogroms in Kishinev, with another one, like the Iranian nuclear threat that threatens Tel Aviv or the Simchat Torah massacre of the northwestern Negev. In essence, Zionism has merely swapped ailment A for ailment B.

Yet despite Meron's reservations, to those who witness the combat spirit of the IDF soldiers and the full support of their parents, the Zionist narrative manifests itself in all its practical simplicity by demonstrating a readiness to fight without hesitation to defend the people and the country. This is a major historical achievement.

### **Cracks in the "Iron Wall"**

A hundred years ago, in the article "The Iron Wall," Ze'ev Jabotinsky laid the cornerstone for the foundations of Israel's security perception. As early as 1923, he identified the motivations behind Arab resistance to the Zionist enterprise in the Land of Israel and proposed a strategic approach to achieving Zionist goals.

The relevance of his article to the security challenges of modern-day Israel can be summarized in three statements.

**First:** The Arab resistance and struggle against Zionism express a religious-nationalist struggle with enduring motivational roots. The idea promoted by the American government and European Union leadership that a positive, lasting solution to the conflict can be arrived at through suitable compensation and willing compromise has been repeatedly revealed as overly optimistic.

**Second:** The Arab struggle and adoption of terrorist methods and violence do not stem from economic hardship, poverty, and despair, as many in the West and certain prominent Israeli "peace-seekers" claim. Instead, it arises from the Arab hope that Zionist dominance can be consistently challenged and weakened until its ultimate demise. It is not despair that generates Arab terrorism but hope.

**Third:** In recognizing the first two statements as true, the concept of the "Iron Wall" negates the Arab hope of achieving gains through incessant resistance to the Zionist Israeli presence and authority.

In 1936, during a discussion at the Mapai Center, David Ben-Gurion stated that "there is no chance for an understanding with the Arabs." Therefore, efforts should be directed towards an understanding with the British. He said, "What can push the Arabs towards mutual understanding with us? Facts! Only after we manage to create a significant Jewish presence in the Land of Israel, with a Jewish force that everyone will see cannot be moved, only then will the preliminary conditions for discussion with the Arabs be established."

The language and spirit of these words express the Iron Wall position as articulated in Jabotinsky's article: "As long as the Arabs have even a glimmer of hope of getting rid of us, they will not give up on this hope... A living people agrees to concessions on fateful questions whose importance is immense only when it has no hope, only when not a single crack is visible in the Iron Wall."

In recent years, deep cracks have appeared in the Zionist Iron Wall. The goal of the current war should be to restore the Zionist Iron Wall and establish it with renewed strength for the next hundred years.

Within this context, the rehabilitation of the communities damaged in Hamas's attack and the return of the communities to the Galilee and Negev are critical components in the reconstruction of the Iron Wall. This means far more than simply renovation and construction. Ben-Gurion wrote about the sources of strength for victory in 1948: "We reached victory through three paths: the path of faith, the path of pioneering creativity, and the path of suffering." These will be the paths to victory in today's war as well.

### **The collapse of the dream of peace**

In his eulogy at the grave of Ro'i Rothberg in Nahal Oz in April 1956, Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan said: "A generation of pioneers we are, bareheaded, with steel helmets and the rifle. We cannot plant a tree and build a home. Our children will not have a life if we do not dig shelters..." The speech concluded with the statement: "Ro'i - the light in his heart blinded his eyes, and he did not see the flash of the mortar. The yearning for peace silenced his ears, and he did not hear the voice of the ambush..."

In the midst of the War of Attrition, at the end of the Command and Staff College course in 1969, Moshe Dayan stated his existential philosophy: "Rest and heritage are longed-for aspirations for us, not realities. And if we occasionally achieve them, they are only short intermediate stations - aspirations for the continuation of the struggle." Explaining the necessity of an endless struggle, he said: "The only basic answer we can give to the question 'what will be' is - we will continue to fight, just as we did in the past, and now too. The answer to the question 'what will be' must focus on our ability to withstand difficulties, our ability to cope - more than on absolute and final solutions to our problems. We must prepare ourselves mentally and physically for a prolonged process of struggle."

These words differ significantly from those expressed by the Israeli leadership in recent decades. For instance, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, in his speech at the UN, chose to emphasize: "What Israelis want is a good life for themselves and their families and a future ready for their children."

Moshe Dayan, despite his emphasis on normalcy, always highlighted the presence in our consciousness of the struggle. This was brutally expressed in his will, where he instructed his three children: "Serve the inheritance of the fathers each one, and the sword over your beds, and in the evening, it will become a legacy to your sons. And now, let each one take his backpack and stick and cross the Jordan in his own way..." (Yael Dayan, *My Father's House*, p. 207).

Yael Dayan, representing a generation that has refused to reconcile with the inevitability of constant struggle, described in her book her deep dissociation from her father's will: "I felt like a person banished from paradise, a curse more than a blessing. We were all destined to work the land and fight, and this was a commandment for our children." (*ibid.*)

On Saturday, October 7, the dream of an Israeli paradise collapsed. With the war in Ukraine and even in Western Europe, it has become clear that despite hopes for peace everywhere, there is no paradise on Earth. As expressed in the Negev lullaby my mother sang to me in my childhood, "There is no deep silence without a weapon...sleep, son."

## **Conclusion**

The State of Israel is in one of the most difficult crises it has ever known. It suffered an unprecedented blow and is required to receive an unprecedented punishment. Asking to return to the familiar track after making technical repairs is asking to escape the true magnitude of the repair that is required. The national leadership of the State of Israel, together with the security system, must be committed in the face of this crisis to formulating a new national security concept.

After the surprise attack by Hamas on October 7, will residents of Rosh HaAyin and Kfar Saba lend a hand in the establishment of a Palestinian state that would turn them into border settlements akin to Nahal Oz or Metula? Any arrangement of the territory of Israel between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea that aims at a Jewish withdrawal from Judea and Samaria, an uprooting of Israeli settlements, and a defining of the eastern border of the State of Israel in the Rosh HaAyin-Kfar Saba region along Highway 6 would be a Palestinian national victory and an Israeli defeat.

Despite all our faith in the IDF and its capabilities, there is not now, and there will not be, an option to defend the State of Israel along the coastal strip. This fact must be brought to broad national consensus and placed at the center of the Israeli security perception.

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