

Virtually Normal

Is Israel like any other country?

David Hazony, The New Republic Published: Wednesday, June 11, 2008



Courtesy Central Zionist Archives

Jerusalem

In 2006, after the Lebanon war, Israel's foreign ministry decided that the country had a p.r. problem on its hands. The solution? Let the world know that Israel, far from being a place of war and terror, was in fact a land of sunny beaches and beautiful women: in other words, a country that was fundamentally *normal*. And, so, Israel retained the p.r. firm Saatchi and Saatchi, which promised a campaign to help the Jewish state build a "narrative of normalcy." Then, last July, the Israeli consulate in New York arranged for the men's magazine *Maxim* to publish a spread of minimally dressed Israeli women. When feminists and Orthodox Jews protested, the consulate's spokesman explained that his aim was "to promote Israel as a normal country, particularly among the magazine's young male readership."

A normal country? Israel? That idea may sound far-fetched to Americans. Yet, as anyone who has ever lived here knows, the desire for normalcy is deeply etched in Israel's national psyche. For 60 years, the Jewish state has struggled to attain a "place among the nations," to quote Benjamin Netanyahu's book by the same name, in which Israelis would live harmoniously with their surroundings the way other, "normal" countries do.

And, in some respects, Israel does seem to be edging toward normalcy. The year 2007 saw a lull in attacks, with only one suicide bombing and fewer Israelis killed than in any year since 2000. Freed from fighting terrorists, Israel's police have turned to ordinary crime, resulting in a 20 percent drop in both homicides and robberies. Tourism is up, as is immigration. The economy remains strong.

The picture, however, is not all rosy. For one thing, normalcy has come with an ugly downside: As terrorism has waned, Israelis have begun focusing on domestic politics--and what they have found is not a pretty sight. The past 18 months saw the resignation of the country's president over rape charges; major criminal investigations against a former finance minister and the head of Israel's tax authority; the imprisonment of Ariel Sharon's eldest son on corruption charges; and crippling strikes by high school teachers and university professors. Most recently, Israelis learned that their scandal-plagued prime minister, Ehud Olmert, was under investigation yet again, this time on suspicion of accepting

bribes from a New York businessman.

But not only has this measure of normalcy been deeply disappointing, it has also been far from complete; in many respects, Israel remains the abnormal country it has always been. International bodies condemn Israel's human rights record while ignoring far worse atrocities around the world; anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel continue to occupy much of the global discourse; Iran still appears bent on Israel's destruction.

And so, as the country marks its sixtieth anniversary, one begins to wonder: What, exactly, would it mean for Israel to be a normal country? Is such a thing really desirable? And, even if it is desirable, is it actually possible?

The Jewish people's complicated relationship with normalcy goes all the way back to the Bible. In Genesis, God tells Abraham that his descendents will be a chosen people, and it is already clear that their unique status in the world will carry a steep price: isolation among humanity, beginning with slavery under the pharaohs. When Moses leads his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness of Sinai, the Israelites' ambivalence about their uniqueness becomes clear, as they immediately beg him to return them to civilization, to forget the hardships of slavery and bring them back to Egypt. In the biblical narrative, this longing for normalcy is at first seen as unequivocally a bad thing.

But, later, when the Israelites demand to be ruled by a king--"that we may be a nation like all other nations"--the biblical rejection of normalcy becomes more tempered. It is soon clear that normalcy has benefits: Samuel anoints Saul as king, setting the stage for the reigns of David and Solomon, a kind of golden age in Jewish history. The chosen people might have something special to give the world--might become, as Isaiah put it, a "light unto nations"--but to do so would require that they live like a nation, addressing the same issues of war and politics that every people must face in order to survive.

This kind of normal life for a self-defined abnormal people was maintained, more or less, for a thousand years, until the dawn of the Common Era, when Judea was a vassal state under the thumb of the Roman Empire. When the Romans tried to force the Jews to abandon their unique practices, the Jews launched an impossible rebellion to preserve their uniqueness. The Romans crushed the revolt, and, ultimately, the Jews were dispersed into exile.

For the next 2,000 years, Jews would be the least normal people on earth. Refusing to assimilate into other cultures, they were expelled from countries across Europe, forever needing to regroup in another host nation. The Jew was always different, never normal. "For the living," wrote early Zionist thinker Leo Pinsker in 1882, "the Jew is a dead man; for the natives, an alien and a vagrant; for property holders, a beggar; for the poor, an exploiter and a millionaire; for patriots, a man without a country; for all classes, a hated rival."

This, of course, was the only possible outcome for a people that insisted on maintaining its uniqueness but possessed none of the normal tools for survival--such as land and power--that other groups had. By the late nineteenth century, however, nationalist movements had given birth to independent states for any number of peoples. It was only a matter of time before the Jews would search for an end to exile, and a return to some measure of normalcy.

Zionism was not the first modern movement that sought normalcy for the Jews. Throughout the nineteenth century, many Jews tried to take advantage of Europe's new liberal spirit. In droves, they shaved their beards, donned modern clothing, and endeavored to participate in the life of their host countries.

The failure of this tack was apparent by the late nineteenth century, as enduring anti-Semitism prevented Jews from enjoying anything like the equality they had hoped for. In

1894, the trial in France of Jewish army captain Alfred Dreyfus laid bare the inability of gentiles, even in the most enlightened of countries, to accept the Jew as normal. Present at the trial was the journalist and playwright Theodor Herzl, who was so stunned by the failure of assimilation that he began work on *The Jewish State*, in which he argued for a very different solution to the Jewish problem, a different kind of normal. "Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe adequate to meet our rightful national requirements," he wrote. "We will attend to the rest."

The Zionist movement that Herzl helped found contained something of a paradox on the question of normalcy. On the one hand, the Jews would be normalized through relocation to their own sovereign homeland. On the other hand, this normalization would enable Jews to fully express their uniqueness-- just as they had in the biblical kingdom. "The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness," Herzl wrote. According to this view, the only thing preventing Jews from realizing their potential as a moral and creative force in the world was their severe abnormality in exile. Jean-Jacques Rousseau once wrote that "I shall never believe I have heard the arguments of the Jews until they have a free state, schools, and universities, where they can speak and dispute without risk. Only then will we know what they have to say." One of the most influential Zionist writers, Ahad Ha'am, called on Jews to shed their traditional dependence on texts-- their identity as the "people of the book"--and embrace normal human life. Only by doing so, he wrote, could "the Jewish soul be freed from its shackles and regain contact with the broad stream of human life without having to pay for its freedom by the sacrifice of its individuality."

Thus, from its inception, Zionism embodied two conflicting moods: the need for normalcy and the longing for uniqueness. The Jews who went to Palestine sought both. But, perhaps because the dream of normalizing was so grand and the work required so consuming, no one really noticed the inner tension between normalcy and uniqueness, or at least the need to figure out what, exactly, needed to be normal, and what special. For the time being, the most the Jew could hope for was a national life like that of other people.

The Holocaust removed all doubt as to the precariousness of Jewish abnormality. Both Jews and non-Jews saw in the creation of a Jewish state a kind of consolation, but also a belated effort to normalize the Jews. It soon became apparent, however, that the new state would be anything but normal. A nation made up mostly of immigrants; a republic founded by secularists but absorbing hundreds of thousands of religious Jews; a democracy for a people with almost no tradition of democratic self-government; a refuge under physical attack--for decades, one could not be blamed for feeling that the Jewish dream of normalization still had a long way to go.

And yet, given where it started, the Zionist project of normalizing the Jews today seems to have been an astonishing success. Israel is now a modern, developed state, with a strong economy that has, among other achievements, helped to drive forward the Internet revolution. It ranks thirteenth in the world in life expectancy--just below Australia and well above the United States. In sports, the country has become a player despite its size: Israeli soccer standouts compete for top teams in Europe, and Tel Aviv's basketball team has won three European championships in the past seven years. Israel's presence has been felt in the artistic fields as well. The architect for the World Trade Center Memorial, Michael Arad, is Israeli. Supermodel Bar Refaeli made headlines last year thanks to her on-again off-again romance with Leonardo DiCaprio, and an Israeli movie, *Beaufort*, was recently nominated for best foreign film at the Oscars. Compared to the conditions that prevailed when Herzl was writing, who can argue that the Jews have not normalized?

Yet, despite all this, the demon of normalcy still haunts the Israeli conscience. It appears most often in the context of Israel's struggle for security and international legitimacy-- especially with regard to the ongoing fight against the Palestinians. In politics in recent years, the call for normalcy has become a touchstone of the left. Yossi Beilin, the head of Israel's far-left Meretz Party and an architect of the Oslo accords, described in a speech in 2002 how he felt during the 1990s, when a chain of diplomatic advances gave many Israelis hope of imminent peace: "The world smiles, we gain entry into clubs where previously the

bouncers had stood at the doors and said 'No' to Israel. ... We have new friends, as though they had allowed us to touch something else, to savor the taste of a normal country, which has familiar neighbors. For the first time." When asked in 2006 to describe his vision for Israel, Ophir Pines-Paz, a contender for the leadership of the Labor Party, said this: "Nowhere does it say that we are supposed to be abnormal. I believe in a Jewish state that is democratic and normal. Now we are going through a rough period, true. But, in the end, we want to arrive at peace. In the end, we want to arrive at normalcy here."

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that "normalcy" is merely a stand-in for peace with the Arabs. The ease with which Israeli leaders unsheathe the dagger of "normal" in political sparring suggests a public fear of the abnormal that crosses political lines and runs much deeper than the conflict with Palestinians. Ehud Barak's claim in 2005 that Ariel Sharon should resign on corruption charges included the assertion that, "in any normal country, Sharon would have no longer been in power." And, when Michael Kleiner, a Knesset member for the right-wing Herut Party, said in 2001 that Arab MK Azmi Bishara had flouted Israeli law in visiting Syria, Kleiner could not help but add that, "in any normal country, they'd put him before a firing squad."

At the same time, there is a conflicting impulse in contemporary Israeli life: the impulse not to be *toonormal*. Zionism's complicated relationship to normalcy stems in part from a particularly skewed view of history: a history of looking at the world from within the dark tomb of exile, in which the nations of the world are both alluring and threatening, living a life of agriculture and war, of sovereign power and brutality, of freedom and menace. For the Jew, the cry for normal is a cry for a life denied to him for centuries--a life, however, that he is never fully sure he really wants.

No Israeli, after all, wants to adopt the brutal, Hobbesian rules of normal peoples in history--the willingness to use force indiscriminately, to commit atrocities for the sake of securing their existence. Political movements advocating expelling the Palestinians have not simply failed electorally, but have been banned as racist. Israel has had limitless opportunities to be on the darkest side of "normal," yet, with few exceptions, it has refrained from doing so. "Woe unto us," wrote the Zionist philosopher Eliezer Berkovits in 1943, "if the degeneration of the exile should lead us to a Hebrew nationalism along the European pattern. ... Not every form of [a Jewish state] is worth the trouble, and many a form could be unworthy of Judaism."

This particular sensitivity, of course, is the button that opponents of Israel inevitably push in their rhetoric against the Jewish state. The occupation, the recourse to violence against its neighbors--these are cited as proof that Israel has failed in preserving the Jews' character as a moral people. The critic George Steiner, for instance, asserts that the Zionist drive to normalize Jews has meant repudiating the entire point of Judaism: "It would, I sense, be somehow scandalous ... if the millennia of revelation, of summons to suffering, if the agony of Abraham and of Isaac, from Mount Moria to Auschwitz, had as its last consequence the establishment of a nation state, armed to the teeth, a land for the bourse and of the mafiosi, as are all other lands. 'Normalcy' would, for the Jew, be just another mode of disappearance."

Steiner pushes his point even further, invoking the trope of Nazism in attacking Zionism. In his novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, he puts his fiercest attacks against Israel into the mouth of a mythicized Adolf Hitler, who, after hiding in Argentina for decades, has finally been caught by Israeli commandoes and spends time with them pontificating about Herzl's *The Jewish State*: "That strange book. I read it carefully. Straight out of Bismarck. The language, the ideas, the tone of it. A clever book, I agree. Shaping Zionism in the image of the new German nation. But did Herzl create Israel, or did I? ...Should you not honor me, who has made you into men of war, who has made of the long vacuous daydream of Zion a reality?"

Comparisons to Nazi Germany are, of course, absurd in every respect. Yet such comparisons continue to be made, principally because they *hurt*--not just because Nazism represents the extreme of Jewish victimhood, but because the Israeli wants to see himself as a repudiation of the darkness of mankind. In this context, to be normal--to be as cavalier with human life as nation-states throughout history, not to mention many states in today's Middle East--

suddenly becomes a powerful insult.

Perhaps Israel's critics, despite their warped historical analogies, are right about one thing: Maybe normalcy really is overrated. In the wake of the 2006 Lebanon war, the influential Israeli journalist Ari Shavit suggested that Israel's preoccupation with normalcy had gone too far. The country's lackluster military performance, he argued, was the result of years of neglect stemming from the belief that, with the Oslo accords, Israel had finally entered the long-desired stage of normalcy. "We were poisoned with an illusion of normalcy," he wrote.

But the constant hunt for normalcy does more than undermine Israel's ability to defend itself; it may also undermine Israel's ability to be genuinely unique. Natan Sharansky, who survived nine years in the gulag without acceding to his captors' demands that he become a normal Soviet citizen, sees the drive for normalcy as a narcotic, which could make Israel irrelevant to Jewish life: "The more 'normal' our nation is, the less appeal it has to Jews everywhere, both in Israel and in the diaspora; on the other hand, the more exceptional we allow Israel to become, the more powerful the idea of the Jewish state will be, in the eyes of all of our people."

There is also the sheer difficulty of defining what, exactly, normalcy means. Normalcy by the standards of Western nations? Normalcy by the standards of the Middle East? Germany and France once butchered each other with a brutality that makes Israeli roadblocks and the Gaza blockade look like dessert service at the Prime Grill; what makes it possible for them to live in peace today is that *both* nations chose to abandon violence--a decision much of the Arab world has yet to make. To survive in these conditions, Israel has no choice but to continue investing resources in its defense. Perhaps that makes it abnormal by the standards of Western democracies. But the Middle East, as we all should by now have learned, is not always fertile ground for Western conceptions of normalcy.

The final problem with the Israeli quest for normalcy is that it is--well, abnormal. Every country has a national narrative that seeks to explain itself as special in some way. (In the United States, it is the widely shared belief in American Exceptionalism.) Why should Israel insist on being any different?

Given all this, maybe it is time for Israelis to finally accept their country for what it is--extremely normal and perplexingly abnormal, both at the same time. This, after all, is exactly the sort of state that early Zionists had in mind: a homeland for an exiled people who would be allowed to defend themselves, as normal people do, while also showing the world what unique things they had to say, as Rousseau predicted they might. To go on demanding ever-higher degrees of normalcy of themselves will do little to address the problems the country faces, and Israelis might be better off dropping the issue altogether. Maybe then they would feel a little more normal.

David Hazony is a writer living in Jerusalem.