Israelis, Jews, Palestinians: Reflections of an American Student*

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Preface

"Jewish, not Israeli" is a phrase I found myself repeating to many a Palestinian this summer (the summer of May 2010, following my senior year of high school) at Seeds of Peace international conflict resolution camp. Although I was part of the American delegation, and by definition not an Israeli, I was often identified by Palestinian campers as the "other side." But Israel is neither my birthplace nor my current home, so one need not have expected my beliefs to oppose Palestinian existence.

Seeds of Peace is a nonprofit organization that brings together young adults from conflict areas in the Middle East and Southeast Asia to share their personal stories from the conflicts that often shape their lives. Two hours of every day at camp, a dialogue was facilitated among a group of about four Israelis, four Palestinians, two Egyptians, two Jordanians, and two or three Americans, when the campers had a unique opportunity to discuss the conflict on both a political and personal level. The rest of each day, the campers played sports and games or participated in lighthearted activities that allowed them to get to know one

another outside their national identities.

As a Jewish American, I often found it difficult to define my role in the dialogue sessions, as well as at other times among my peers. My connection to Israel had thus far been solely a religious one, and I had never explored the idea that perhaps I have an obligation to defend the land as a political state. I found that many of the Palestinians' stories resonated with me on a personal human level. And while I did not necessarily always agree with their presentations, I had a deeper historical and national connection with the Israeli narrative. I felt that as a Jew I have some obligation to the State of Israel, although I could not define what that obligation is or whether the State of Israel has an obligation to me as Jew.

The tension I felt between the identities "Jewish" and "Israeli" led me to explore the perspective and self-identification of my Israeli friends who were at the camp. None of them practiced mitzvoth or Jewish customs; none had been educated at religious schools; their familiarity with Jewish texts, practice, and religious history was extremely minimal. Except for one or two Israelis in the program, the only defining characteristic of their Jewish was is the fact that they live in the Land of Israel. To most of them, being Jewish was not part of their *national* identity; rather, it is a religious heritage, and one hardly relevant to their lives. To these secular Israelis, to be a Jew means something different than to be part of the Israeli nation, the former being an abstract, religious identity and the latter being a tangible, definable political identity. When the dialogues would turn to the legitimacy of the State of Israel, Judaism was not factored into the equation by secular Israelis, because in their minds the two identities are separate. This tension between Zionism and Judaism can largely be explained by the fact that Zionism is an ideology that emphasizes a land with borders, and a government, while Judaism was originally defined first and foremost by an event that took place outside the land of Israel, and for the past 2,000 years has been about a relationship between a nation and God—whether that nation lives in the land of Israel or not.

The Jewish nation is unique in its definition and establishment, and especially in its relationship to land. It began as a family, descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—defined primarily by blood—united by the events that took place after the Exodus from Egypt and ultimately forming a sovereign state following the conquest of the land of Canaan. Although the Jews became an autonomous nation within physical borders, the status of an Israelite was defined

by descent. Therefore, the Jewish nation is a family that belongs in a land but is not reliant on a land in order to exist. There is no other case in which a nation is defined as a nation before it enters a land; every other nation unites as a nation as a result of geographical commonness. Philosopher Michael Wyschogrod, in his book*The Body of Faith,* articulates this unique quality of the Jewish nation.

The land had to be conquered. The result has been that Jewish consciousness has vividly retained the memory of the land as having belonged to others before it came to belong to Israel. Other nations do not retain such memories. Their memory does not go back to a time when they did not occupy their land. In fact, the national identities of other nations are land-bound identities. The nation is defined by the territory it occupies. But [the Jewish nation] comes into national existence before it occupies the land. It becomes a nation on the basis of a promise delivered to it when it is a stranger in the land of others. This awareness of being a stranger is burned into Jewish consciousness. The God of Israel is not a God whose jurisdiction is defined by territorial boundaries. (Wyschogrod, 220—221)

Wyschogrod further explains that what unites Jews is their familial descent from Abraham. As such, Jews do not internalize the common Western division between faith and nationality. To be a Jew is not merely to have religious obligations, it is first and foremost to be part of a family and nation.

Judaism is not a set of beliefs, however broadly that term be interpreted. A full definition of Judaism does, of course, involve a whole complex of ideas, beliefs, values and obligations posed by Judaism. The whole of the immense literary output of Judaism consists of the elaboration of just these ideas. But however crucial these are, they are, in a sense, superstructure rather than foundation. The foundation of Judaism is the family identity of the Jewish people as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Whatever else is added to this must be seen as growing out of and related to the basic identity of the Jewish people as the seed of Abraham elected by God through descent from Abraham. (Wyschogrod, 57)

Because the Jewish nation is not defined by a geographical area but by a familial bond, it has been able to survive in exile for the past 2,000 years. Rabbi Meir Soloveichik has noted that "after they were exiled from the land with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., [Jewish] nationhood remained intact for millennia, enabling a Jew born in 19th-century Morocco to consider himself a member of the same nation as a Jew born in 19th -century Poland." The memory of—and the longing to return to—the land has also played a vital role in sustaining the cohesiveness of the Jewish nation through prayer and a collective ultimate goal, but it has never been the defining characteristic. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it, "there is a difference between where we are and who we are. Judaism is not wrong to see identity as a matter of birth" (Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll,* 46).

In the book of Exodus, Moses is one of the first Jews to struggle with his identity and with what it means to be a Jew. When God comes to him at the burning bush and assigns him his task of leading the Jews out of Egypt, Moses' first question is "Who am I?" Moses is questioning the fundamental identity of nationhood. Who is he—what is his identity—that makes *him* qualified for such a job? He did not live among the rest of the Jews, was not brought up as they were, nor was he even considered one of them for most of his life. The only connection he had to his people was a familial one, and at this turning point in his life he questions the legitimacy or sufficiency of that connection. God answers him by explaining that He is the God of Moses' ancestors, and, as Rabbi Sacks puts it, "Moses' crisis is resolved and never reappears in that form. He now knows that he is part of an unfinished story that began with the patriarchs and continues through him. He may wear the clothes and speak the language of an Egyptian, but he is a Jew because that is who his ancestors were, and their hopes now rest on him" (Sacks, *A Letter in the Scroll,* 46). The Jewish nation is defined by ancestry, not by culture or location, and Moses' return to his nation shows how strong the familial tie can be in holding a nation together. The Jewish nation has stayed alive without the bonds of language or homeland for hundreds of years, and Moses was the very first to demonstrate how powerful the bond of family can be in re-uniting a people.

That Judaism is defined by a familial rather than a racial or geographical bond is evident in the conversion process. When one becomes a Jew, he or she severs all previous familial ties—her siblings are no longer her siblings, and he has neither a mother nor father; for he or she has joined a new family. Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, in his essay on conversion, "How Not to Become a Jew," explains that "just like a born Jew, a convert is not only a coreligionist, not only a fellow citizen, but also a new brother or sister. In reciting Jewish liturgy, the convert joins all

other Jews in referring to the Almighty as ‘the God of my fathers’; he means it, and he is meant to mean it, in more than a metaphorical sense.” For this reason, Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein explains, conversion to Judaism is not a private religious baptism; it takes place in a Jewish court, because it is a citizenship hearing. Thus, Rabbi Lichtenstein notes, the biblical Ruth only informs Naomi that “your God will be my God,” after she first declared, “your nation will be my nation.” Because the Jews are a family, a child born to a Jewish mother will be a Jew from the moment of birth (unlike a child born to a Christian mother who becomes Christian upon baptism) until his death, regardless of his actions or beliefs. The Jewish people is the only people that is considered both a religion and a nation, and is not defined conventionally like any other faith or nation. This uniqueness gives the Jews a special role in both of mankind’s religious and nationalistic spheres.

This familial connection, which overrides differences in language, culture, appearance, location, and even denomination, has allowed the Jews to remain a nation even while dispersed over the globe. And interestingly, as Michael Wyschogrod writes, it is the Jews’ definition of themselves as a nation without a land that allowed the land-based State of Israel to come into existence in the first place.

Modern Israel could not have come into being without it. Out of people of the most diverse cultural and national traditions, Israel created one people. To be more accurate, it did not create such a people but found one in existence. In the early stages of the Zionist movement, European Jews had little acquaintance with non-European, Sephardic Jews…Yet the viability of a state made up of such diverse elements was never brought into question. There was a bond among Jews that was deeper than all the differences, which turned out to be far more superficial than would have been thought. (Wyschogrod, 240)

But the nation that arose, the modern State of Israel, relies on borders and government and judicial systems. For 2,000 years, the Jewish nation was not defined by geography, but with the rise of the State of Israel, the two identities became intertwined and often confused. Jewishness had for ages provided the bond of family, religion, and nationality to Jews everywhere, but Israeli nationality, if not defined properly, can create a new set of definitions for what it means to be Jewish and create divisions among Jews. The elements of Jewishness that allowed the Jews to remain a nation without a land also enabled the birth of the State of Israel to succeed. But this new state by its existence invites Israelis to redefine

their nationhood as land-based, and the nation to which they belong as Israeli rather than Jewish. This new identity and definition carries the danger that Jewishness will no longer be about nationality, and will be redefined solely as a religious vocation.

This is precisely the tension I witnessed at Seeds of Peace among my secular Israeli friends. Several months after camp had ended, I went to Israel to investigate this dialectic that exists between the Jewish and Israeli identities. I interviewed several of my secular Israeli friends, to hear in their own words how this tension played out in their self-identification and their identification with their state and of their faith. Among the questions I asked were: What is Israel? What does it mean to be part of the nation of Israel? What does it mean to be part of the Jewish nation? And what nations did your ancestors belong to?

When asked to define the State of Israel, Nili, a self-defined secular Israeli from Petah Tikvah who attended Seeds of Peace, explained that it is “my home. The place I was born,” and went on to say that being part of the nation of Israel means “you belong to somewhere, you have a place that you live and you have a place that is it for you, because I’m a Jew, it’s my country so [I] belong to it.” For Nili, being Israeli is her nationality that she says is connected to the fact that she is Jewish; but when asked what it means to be part of the Jewish nation, she responded by saying (translated from Hebrew), “I am not so connected to my faith because I don’t really do mitzvoth and all of that.” In other words, for Nili, her Jewishness is a religious matter rather than a national one; she added, however, that she understands that other Jews, as they travel all over the world, “feel as if they have a community, that they have people to rely on.” She understands the connection that Jews have, but does not include herself in it, because, to Nili, Judaism is separate from her national self-identity. She defines herself as Israeli, and although she acknowledges that being Jewish contributes to that identity—along with the fact that she was physically born in the state—she does not recognize that the identities are intertwined, and that the State of Israel’s existence is a result of the fact that the Jewish nation was able to stay strong and proud and connected throughout the centuries.

To Nili, nationality is her primary identity, and she does not feel as if she is part of another community other than the State of Israel. She sees nationality as being bound by land. I then asked Nili,

“Where are your ancestors from, and what nation did they belong to?”

“My grandparents are from Russia, and they were Russians, on both sides.”

“But what nation did they belong to?”

“Russian.”

She did not say they are part of the Jewish nation or of an ultimately larger community not defined by borders; her grandparents would have certainly defined themselves as Jews first and foremost, and would have been shocked to be referred to as Russians. Before 1948, Jews had a hard time being faithful countrymen because often their countries betrayed them, and they also had to struggle to hold on to their Jewish identities. Identifying with the Jewish nation was important for survival. My experience is that “Israeli” easily replaces “Jewish” for people who live in Israel who do not practice Judaism or make it a prominent part of their existence. Nili acknowledges that Judaism plays a role in her overall sense of self, but it is not center stage, and is just a component of her nationality. When asked what the purpose of the State of Israel is, Nili said, “To bring all the Jews to one place because there has always been anti-Semitism, and I think that they should all live in one place so that they can have a government and an army and so that they can protect themselves.” For Nili, Israel is a Jewish State so that the Jewish people can live peacefully. To her, the Jews need to create for themselves a nationality with government and autonomy like every other nation so that they can define themselves as every other nation does, with borders and a government. The irony is that the existence of the State of Israel, a testament to Jewish resilience, also enables non-practicing Jews in Israel to forget the long-standing uniqueness of the Jewish definition of nationhood, which does not rely on geographical commonness, into a land-based nationalistic one.

Many of the other self-defined secular Israeli friends I interviewed came to conclusions similar to Nili’s. Nadav, a secular Israeli living in Tel Aviv, who did not attend Seeds of Peace, said that being part of the Israeli nation means “living and being part of the Israeli life, living in Israel,” and that being part of the Jewish nation means “living among other Jews and participating in life with other Jews,” with no mention of history or ancestry. Nadav very clearly separates the two identities on a very technical level; neither identity is reliant on the other. Like

Nili, Nadav said that the purpose of the State of Israel is to create a solution to anti-Semitism and to bring all the Jews to one place so that they can “express themselves as a nation.” He acknowledges the role that the Jewish nation plays in the establishment of Israel, but still his national identity takes precedence over his Jewish identity. He describes his ancestors as belonging to the nations of Poland, Russia, and Hungary, in the same way that he belongs to the nation of Israel. “The same way the French are connected with France because it’s the land of their ancestors, a territory that they have an emotional connection with, that’s Israel for me.” Nadav views nationality as being strictly land-based and, although he sees a connection between his ancestors and his nationality, he is referring to his ancestors who actually inhabited the same land that he does now, not the ones who may not have necessarily lived in Israel; they do not provide for him a reason to be Israeli.

Nadav goes on on to create a divide between his religion and nationality, explaining that government and statehood should only be influenced by religion “as long as it does not interfere with democracy. The existence of Israel as a modern nation-state separate from the Jewish identity ultimately leaves my friends with a contradiction: why should they be allowed to form a new nation in this specific land? If Jews are not defined by descent from Abraham, with whom God formed a covenant and to whom He promised the Holy Land, then by what right do modern Israelis in this century lay claim to this land with these borders?

The contradiction that the secular Israelis pose for themselves became evident to me during my visit when I interviewed my fellow Palestinian campers from Seeds. As I noted, secular Israelis create a divide between their identity as Jews and their identity as Israelis when asked about how they define themselves and what it means to be part of each nation—but to some extent the Israeli identity requires Judaism for its legitimacy, and here these Israelis either contradict themselves or remain answerless. In contrast, my Palestinian friends ironically understand that Zionism is intimately bound up with the fact that all Jews share a national status, and that their claim to the land lies in Jewish history and in the religious longings of Judaism. I asked Fadi, a Palestinian living in the West Bank who attended Seeds of Peace, how he thinks the Israeli nation defines and legitimizes itself. When asked to define the Jewish nation, Fadi hesitantly answered “Israel,” because to him the identities “Jewish” and “Israeli” go hand in hand, and, although he knows that fundamentally they are different, he also

knows that the Israeli identity relies on components of Judaism. When asked what Israelis say to defend their right to be in Israel and to what extent he thinks their claim is legitimate, Fadi answered that “their excuse is that the country was promised to them by God, I can’t deny or agree or say [it’s legitimate]… I don’t mind living with Jews, but not in this kind of way.” Fadi sees the connection that Judaism has to the State of Israel and refers to the people that he lives among as Jews, not Israelis. Similarly, Jalal, a Palestinian from East Jerusalem who also attended Seeds of Peace, defined the Jewish nation as “Israel” and said (partly translated from Arabic), “I think Israelis say, almost all of them, that it is the land that they are promised to be in by the Bible, that it’s written that it’s the promised land and that they have to be in it and protect it…”

The Palestinians acknowledge the interconnected relationship between the Jewish nation and the Israeli nation, more so than my secular Israeli friends, because they know that it explains why Jews all over the world are allowed instant Israeli citizenship and why Israel was ultimately formed in the Middle East, and not in Uganda. Judaism has answers to all the arguments that question the State’s existence, even though they are not the only answers. The State was established for many reasons, such as to create a haven from anti-Semitism, as Nili and Nadav said, but the other reasons do not answer the questions that only a historical and religious claim to the land of Israel can.

The Palestinian definition of nationhood is similar to that of secular Israelis—a definition that allows there to be a situation in which the nation could no longer exist. When I asked Fadi what it means to be part of the Palestinian nation, he corrected me and said that Palestine is not a nation:

“If Palestine was a nation, it would be nice.”

“Why isn’t Palestine a nation?”

“Because it’s under occupation.”

“What does that mean that it’s under occupation?”

“That a country under occupation is a country that is ruled by a different power other than its own people, including water resources, land, freedom of transportation.”

“So it’s not a nation if it doesn’t have a country?”

“It’s people…but it’s not a nation because it’s not a country.”

This definition of nationhood is completely based on land and statehood, a definition that the Jewish nation has never applied to itself until now. According to this definition, one that secular Israelis adhere to, nationhood is bound up with statehood, which 2,000 years in exile has proven not to be the case for the Jewish nation.

What emerged in my interviews of secular Israelis is that at times, inability to account for the link between Jewish nationhood and Zionism causes the most secular Israelis to completely redefine the State of Israel and its purpose. Shahar, a secular Israeli from Jerusalem who did not attend Seeds of Peace, is a young woman who believes that being part of the Israeli nation means to “be ready to sacrifice yourself for others, to be ready to give up some of what you have so that others will be in a better situation.” Shahar completely separates her religious identity from her nationalistic identity. She said in her interview that she needs Israel for the same reason that the French need France and that the English need England—for reasons solely dependent on geographical circumstances. After Shahar explained that government should not be influenced by religion, I asked her how there could possibly be a Jewish state, and she answered that Israel is not a Jewish state but an Israeli state and that the Jewish religion is an entirely separate entity: “It began as a Jewish state but in my opinion [it changed], I don’t see it as a Jewish state anymore, it can’t stay like that… especially when the population changes so much.” Shahar completely redefines the State of Israel in a way that would not please most Jews around the world and even many of her fellow Israelis. When asked what is significant about the State’s location, Shahar explained that it is the perfect place to build a country—due to the “diversity of terrain, the location of Israel is so special. We have deserts and mountains and everything…the greenery in the North and the emptiness in the South it shows all the amazing things that can happen here.” This redefinition does not provide answers to the most difficult questions that face the young country today. According to Shahar, her immigrant grandparents should not be allowed citizenship anymore than a non-Jew from Asia. She could not answer the question of “why not Uganda?”

Before the end of my trip, I had a chance to interview my self-defined religious Israeli friend Daniella from Jerusalem, who did not attend Seeds of Peace, and ask her the same questions that I had asked the secular Israelis. She immediately defined herself as “a religious, Jewish, Israeli” and as belonging to

the “Jewish and Israeli nations, but more importantly the Jewish nation.” She explained that being part of the Israeli nation means (translated from Hebrew) “to care about the existence of the nation…To me to be Israeli feels like everything is on your shoulders, not every day, but we are always fighting to exist.” When asked what it means to be part of the Jewish nation, Daniella immediately responded that it is “the same thing. Jewish and Israeli isn’t the same thing but they have the same idea that we are united and in danger all the time and we always have to protect ourselves in order to preserve our nation.” To Daniella, Judaism requires as much protection as the State of Israel because they are both nations viewed in the eyes of the world as being intertwined. She views the two identities as needing protection from the same threats, acknowledging the close bond between the two and the fact that many components of the Israeli nation rely on the Jewish nation. She went on to explain that “I think all Jews should live in the State of Israel because all Jews should live together… in the Land of Israel because I believe in the Tanakh and this is the state for the Jews…. I know that we also need the state for [protection from anti-Semitism], but I don’t think that this is the main reason.” Daniella’s opinion regarding the Jewish presence in Israel poses no contradiction when asked what is significant about the State’s location: “I know it has to be here and not in Uganda, to me it is because the Tanakh says so.” Daniella also remains consistent in her opinion that all Jews have the right to live in Israel as she explains that her grandparents, although they are from Hungary, South Africa, Syria, and Romania, “they all share the Jewish nationality,” and so they all have an equal right to Israeli citizenship in the Land of Israel. She does not see the Jewish nation as a land-based one, but as a nation that wants to be based in a certain land.

In May of 2009, Binyamin Netanyahu, the current Prime Minister of Israel, addressed the country and acknowledged the problem that many Israelis have with associating their heritage with their current way of life. He explained that the maintenance of historical ties can have a profound effect on the modern nation-state.

In the Book of Books—in the Bible—a subject that is close to my heart these days. It starts there. It moves through the history of our people: the Second Temple, the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, leaving the ghettos, the rise of Zionism, the modern era, the wars fought for Israel’s existence—the history of Zionism and of Israel. A people must know its past in order to ensure its future… our existence depends not only on a weapons system, our military strength, the strength of our economy, our innovation, our exports, or on all these forces that are indeed

essential. It depends, first and foremost, on the knowledge and national sentiment we as parents bestow on our children, and as a state to its education system. It depends on our culture; it depends on our cultural heroes; it depends on our ability to explain the justness of our path and demonstrate our affinity for our land—first to ourselves and then to others.

Netanyahu acknowledges the fact that in order for Israel to sustain its identity as a nation as well as its legitimacy it must take initiative to strengthen the ties between the heritage of the Israeli nation—the Jewish nation—and the new generation of Israelis.

When reflecting on this experience, I was struck by differences between the opinions of the secular and religious Israelis. Although the visions and goals of both groups may be very similar, their approaches to fulfilling them are drastically different and can have many different consequences. For example, the secular Israelis who view Judaism solely as a religion and Israel solely as a land-based nation—two identities that are not fundamentally intertwined— may never be able to defend their presence in the Middle East, while religious Israelis who believe that the purpose of the State of Israel is primarily to provide the opportunity for Jews to live in the Land of Israel may wind up being insensitive to the claims and rights of non-Jewish Israelis who live in the land. Both identities are important and represent realities that the State of Israel must deal with and reconcile. Both categories of people feel strongly about their presence and the justifications for it, and although they present an array of arguments as well as contradictions, to quote Daniella, “we are all Jews and ultimately want the same things.” Although both approaches to Zionism have positive and negative aspects, the fact that the two cannot reconcile their lack of unity regarding self-identity poses a threat. A society that cannot explain itself cannot ensure its survival. The secular Israelis’ contradictory answers to my questions make me nervous that ultimately they will not be able to answer the larger questions that the world will ask: Why there? Why you? Who are you?

By the end of the experience, I realized that the conflict that Seeds of Peace sets out to settle is just one of many problems that the State of Israel faces. The fact that there is such a large divide in both opinion and practice between secular and religious Israelis poses a problem regarding identity, self-defense, and self-sustenance. As someone who is good friends with both, I have come to the conclusion that both secular and religious Israeli Jews can learn from one another how to value the different approaches to nationality and create a

more cohesive society, one better able to protect the land in the present and plant the real seeds of

* Note from the author: I have been spending the 2010/2011 academic year studying in an Israeli Pre-Army Mehina (preparation year), and have come to understand that the problems Israel faces are much more complicated than I had realized when I first wrote this article. This article is an extremely accurate reflection of my thinking at the time it was written, but I have since developed a more nuanced awareness of the complexities of the current realities. I hope, though, that this article will help readers gain insight into some of the problems facing Israelis and Palestinians; religious and secular Jews; liberals and conservatives.