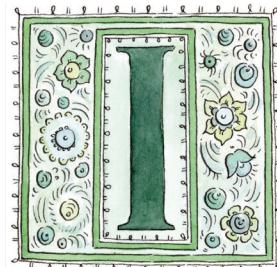


# King David and the Messiness of Power

1 | AMBIVALENCE



WAKE UP, startled, and ask myself, was that a siren, or did I imagine it? A siren. I run downstairs quickly; can't use the elevator. An awkward pajama meeting with the neighbors in the building's air-raid shelter. We sit on white plastic chairs, try to comfort the children, listen to the explosions, refresh the news on our phones over and over again, trying to make sense of it. I hear the rocket whistle, hold my breath, and after a few long seconds, listen to the sound of the Iron Dome intercepting it. I thank God—each time—for those who developed the Iron Dome and for the soldiers operating it, who are the same age as my children. I wish the neighbors good night as I go back upstairs and try to get a bit more sleep before morning. I learn the next day that a man was killed in his home not too far from us.



Can you imagine 4,500 missiles shot at New York, Boston, or Philadelphia in the span of a few days? If missiles were to cross your border, how do you think your military would react?

The nights of May 2021 in Tel Aviv, together with the echoes coming from the North American media, make questions of Jewish power particularly relevant—and particularly challenging.

I remember what it looked like to view Israel from North America, where you have a war not of rockets but of information: images of Israeli military might, of destruction in Gaza, of Palestinian children crying. These scenes are a terrible and heartbreakingly disaster. Full stop.

And the world seems not to understand, or care, that Hamas attacks from within the homes of civilians—that civilian casualties are not only inevitable but intentional. They are a weapon Hamas deploys against us as they consciously present themselves as the powerless, the underdog. Their cynical use of the suffering of the people of Gaza, of their raw human pain, is highly effective. It even affects us, those whom they are trying to destroy. We, too, weep over the loss of Palestinian civilians.

The Israeli tendency is not to show our struggles, but to present a tough image. Our ambivalence about power is profound: The Jewish people can no longer afford to be weak, but we are uneasy about being strong.

I am the daughter of refugees from Germany and Bulgaria who found safety in Israel during the Second World War. Their homelands had viciously turned on them. I learned from my parents that power is an essential part of a life of freedom. Being helpless again was not an option. As my father would say, “we tried it; it didn’t end well.”

I know the occasional helplessness of my mother, waking up screaming from her afternoon naps; of my father, who knew anxiety.

It is important to our life as a Jewish people that there exists a sovereign Jewish state. Even in the years that I lived in Australia and North America, years that broadened my Jewish identity,

I remained a believer in the necessity of our nation-state, whose identity is that of a home for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel. Our democratic state, working to ensure equality for all its citizens. True, we have not yet fully realized this ideal—there is still a great deal of work to be done, as there is in any country. But for our state to survive, power is necessary.

And yet, we Jews come to this project of nationhood with ingrained ambivalence: We require power, and we fear it. National political power has always assumed a complicated value in the canon of Jewish discourse. Jews outside of Israel, who do not share our existential obligation to be powerful, can afford to idealize powerlessness. There are Israeli Jews who also share this distaste for power, even as they are protected by a strong army. In powerlessness, one can be morally perfect. But we all must wrestle with the necessary compromises that come with exercising power in the real world, with real lives at stake.

This fundamental Jewish unease with power is at the core of a deep collective identity crisis. It afflicts us in both Israel and North America. We must look directly at this crisis and endeavor to understand its roots. The unifying ideas and values that once spoke to us across our communities are at stake.

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To begin our discussion, I will call upon King David: David the worm, and David the tree.

In the Book of Samuel, King David is a warrior king. His life's work is to create a sovereign national kingdom and achieve victory over the peoples who threaten it. The matter is seemingly clear-cut. Yet in Jewish memory and Jewish text, as time goes on, David's story evolves, revealing a deep ambivalence about power, might, and strength. David the warrior ensured the Israelites' sovereignty, but the religious warrior could not be the holy leader, the leader in a time of peace.

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We read in the first Book of Chronicles (22:6–10):

[David] summoned his son Solomon and charged him with building the House for the Lord God of Israel. David said to Solomon, “My son, I wanted to build a House for the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘You have shed much blood and fought great battles; you shall not build a House for My name for you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight. But you will have a son who will be a man at rest, for I will give him rest from all his enemies on all sides; Solomon will be his name and I shall confer peace and quiet on Israel in his time. He will build a House for My name; he shall be a son to Me and I to him a father, and I will establish his throne of kingship over Israel forever.’”

Rabbi David Ben Yosef, Radak, writes that it was David's own deep feelings, not God's prohibition, that prevented David from building the Temple. His inner voice told him that his hands were stained with the blood of his enemies; he could therefore not build a place of peace.

Maimonides offers a different emphasis:

Even David a prophet...we find guilty of cruelty, and, although he exercised it only against the heathens, and in the destruction of non-believers, being merciful towards Israel, it is explicitly stated in Chronicles that God, considering him unworthy, did

not permit him to build the Temple, as it was not fitting in His eyes, because of the many people David caused to be killed.  
[Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, Chapter 7:12–13]

A constant state of war bears a price. It hardened David's heart, and such a heart could not build the dwelling place of God.

As Jewish society and culture developed over long years of exile, so, too, did the image of King David. He became what the Jews needed and wanted him to be. After the terrible period following the destruction of the Temple, the Great Rebellion and the Bar Kochba revolt, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai despaired of Jerusalem and chose to reestablish the center of Jewish existence in Yavne. The Jewish focus shifted from national sovereignty to a kingdom of rabbi-scholars. In the literature of the sages that followed, a new King David emerges: a *talmid hacham*, student of a scholar, a wise man. Where the early depictions of David portray him as a hero, a worldly man, a military commander, warrior, and statesman, the later David is spiritual, introverted, restrained, and detached from the affairs of the mundane world. As the Jewish people move from sovereignty to Diaspora, the ideal of power transforms from one of physical might to one of intellectual and spiritual prowess.

The Talmud tells us: "When David would sit and occupy himself with Torah, he would make himself soft as a worm, and when he would go out to war, he would make himself hard and strong as a tree" (Talmud Bavli, Moed Katan, 16b).

We see before us two idealized types of Jewish manhood: the strong, masculine hero of the Bible and the feminine and gentle scholar of the Talmud. The former is content with his power, the latter is repelled by it. The women and men of today's Am Yisrael, today's Jewish people, are still grappling with this complex equation.

In exile, rabbinic Judaism created and developed an entire universe of Jewish life that did not require a sovereign national force. It even came to reject the power involved in having a national home.

The failure of fanaticism in the last days of Jerusalem left in its wake a rabbinic Jewish culture that preferred to live under the rule of another. The longing for Jewish power or national independence was marginalized, even pathologized.

Even the rabbinic image of a powerful God evolved during this period. The rabbis of the Talmud transformed the biblical supernatural deity, with no limits on power, who intervenes and shapes history—the God who destroyed Sodom, rained down the Ten Plagues, parted the Red Sea—into a more mellow God. This God is no longer always mighty; this God cries when His home, His Temple, is destroyed. The Talmud tracks this evolution:

Moses came and said in his prayer: "The great, the mighty, and the awesome God" (Deuteronomy 10:17). Jeremiah the prophet came and said: Gentiles, i.e., the minions of Nebuchadnezzar, are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness? Therefore, he did not say awesome in his prayer: "The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts, is His name" (Jeremiah 32:18). Daniel came and said: Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might? Therefore he did not say mighty in his prayer: "The great and awesome God" (Daniel 9:4). [Talmud Bavli, Yoma, 69b]

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The traumas and tragedies of 19th- and 20th-century antisemitism, coupled with new notions of self-determination, transformed this ideal yet again, at least for some. They asked: If Jews could not thrive—or even survive—in the countries where they were scattered, why could they not create their own state? The longing for the power of a neo-biblical King David reemerged in the binary self-depiction of the early Zionists as "new Jews" who rejected the rabbinic ideal of the *Luftmensch*: soft, passive, and manipulative. New Jews would be once again connected to their bodies and to their land, to self-respect and national power. Israelies today

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have found more of a balance, living in the dynamic continuum between the two options.

So much of the challenge of understanding and appreciating Israel today has to do with a growing worldview that simply condemns power across the board. It views all human relations through the prism of power, demonizing its acquisition and use, as well as those who wield it, and valorizing victimization, helplessness, and those who appear powerless. This conceptual framework is problematic for a country whose frequent need for military power is on display for all the world to see, scrutinized endlessly by the West. In the eyes of many, Jews have moved from victims to victimizers.

Yet power, in and of itself, is neither good nor bad. Such binary judgment misses the human complexity that is necessary for any existence. It is the basic right of every person, and of every Jew, to live his or her life in freedom and security. The question is how to execute one's power, not whether one should. Power in a democracy like Israel must be limited by the legislature and the judiciary. It should be honest and proportionate, and act to ensure the security of its citizens, and it should not harm anyone who does not threaten its existence. Denying the necessity of the existence of the Jewish national project in one fell swoop—repudiating Israel's right to use power, ignoring the ways a democratic Israel constantly limits its own power—is falling into this

binary trap, to the Jewish people's great peril. Even as the West struggles with the idea of power, and especially Jewish power, Israel must nevertheless exercise it. Our lives, simply, depend on it.

## 2 | WHAT MUST NOT BE LOST

Zionism created a Jewish miracle in the State of Israel: the flourishing of a culture based in Jewish ideas, stories, texts, and time. Judaism, Jewishness, Jewish culture encompasses everything, from small to large, religious to secular. The Israeli street is the largest public Jewish space in the world. Cultural Zionism, as envisioned by Ahad Ha'am and Chaim Nahman Bialik in the 19th century, became a reality. It is this rich Jewish existence that is, in my view, the greatest success of Zionism. A total Jewish civilization in a nation-state.

Cultural institutions, deliberations in the courtrooms, debates on which drugs will be included in state-supported medicine, political speeches, military decisions, the television broadcasting schedule—all of this is living, breathing Hebrew culture. The Hebrew calendar is alive and kicking: It is an expression of a common identity, the basis for economic activity. Grocery stores, cafés, and supermarkets compete to offer the most original donut (*sufganiyah*) at Hanukkah, the most delicious kosher-for-Passover cookie, the most innovative Purim costume, and the most beautiful decorations for the sukkah. Whole store shelves are given over to memorial candles for Holocaust Memorial Day and Israel's Memorial Day.

Jewish culture in every space, in every sphere, on every street corner, and on every tongue. Nowhere must this majority culture impinge on the rights of minorities' unique cultural expressions. But all of this is contemporary Jewish discourse, an important part of our shared identity, for Israeli and Diaspora Jews alike.

Sharing an identity, sharing a national story, does not mean we

are all alike—our very diversity, the dynamism of our differences pushing and pulling at us in our own homeland, is also an expression of vibrant Hebrew culture. We are a people; we are connected to the Jews who came before us, to those who live now, to those who will come after us. I do not want to live a life in which there is no encounter or friction with an ultra-Orthodox Jew, a national religious Jew, a Diaspora Jew, or a Palestinian Israeli. I do not want to raise homogeneous children who encounter only one way of thinking, one way of believing, and one approach to the great questions of culture. We are not competing “tribes,” as some would say, but a people who have a history together, who have work to do together. Despite our differences, even because of our differences, we must remain together.

If we lose our shared story, we will lose one another.

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The loss of Jewish solidarity—the loss of the feeling of every Jew that Israel is her national home and that the identity and culture it brings is of value, while the ties that link Israel to the Diaspora fray—has led to disappointment and despair, to cynicism and a growing sense of distance among Jews worldwide. I take courage from the heroic struggle that empowered a new Israeli government just days before I finished this article in June 2021, meeting across serious political divides, creating real partnerships. It is here, at this exciting iteration of Jewish power, where the relationship with North American Jewry becomes so crucial.

There is peril when North American Jews simplistically condemn Israel as one entity, unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the diversity that exists within our state. There is peril when the very idea of Jewish nationalism becomes anathema. Criticizing the abuse of power is of course necessary; but condemning the use of power altogether, refusing to appreciate the reasons why Israel is compelled to use its force, is immoral and naïve.

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Horrified American Jews who feel compelled to dismiss Zionism today are not simply rejecting an ideology, but a complex web of people, a thriving civilization, an evolving state. Zionism is no longer an idea to debate; it is not a slogan on a sign or a hashtag on a social-media post.

Understanding Israel as a real place that struggles with wielded power ethically means embracing the beauty of the dissonant voices within Israel that are engaged in a joint effort at survival and self-determination. This very dissonance is also an expression of a thriving Hebrew culture: “Both these and those are the words of the living God,” we read in the Talmud (*Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b*). Jewish texts are a record of our disagreements; Israel brings this to life in a national context, a democratic context. Perhaps acknowledging Israel’s internal differences, engaging with the broad array of the ideas and people that inhabit this land and infuse it with vitality, offers the possibility of repair, the opportunity to return to mutual respect, to our shared goals as a Jewish people.

Understanding and embracing these differences is also something we Israelis must do ourselves. The use of force in Gaza, the acts of violence between Jewish and Arab Israeli citizens that we saw in May and June 2021, even the broader West Bank occupation altogether, are symptoms of a society uncertain about its identity, a society whose common space does not accommodate the different voices of all its citizens. And the wider Jewish polity, seeking easy

solutions and not understanding our internal complexity, is suffering from the same.

But the necessity of defending major cities from the 4,360 missiles that fell on them for a terrifying 10 days was accompanied by powerful internal disputes in our desperate search for proportionality and moral solutions. Precisely at these moments, when the uses and abuses of power are never more real, we need more engagement, more generosity of interpretation. These moments of crisis make our need for understanding one another across our many differences—including our ideas about the importance of power—more urgent than ever.

When the rabbis attributed weakness to the once all-powerful God, it changed the role humans had in this world, too. It was taught in a *baraita* (a piece of the oral law) that Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the high priest, said:

Once, on Yom Kippur, I entered the innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies, to offer incense, and in a vision I saw Akatriel Ya, the Lord of Hosts...seated upon a high and exalted throne.

And He said to me: Yishmael, My son, bless Me.

I said to Him the prayer that God prays: "May it be Your will that Your mercy overcome Your anger, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and may You act toward Your children with the attribute of mercy, and may You enter before them beyond the letter of the law."

The Holy One, Blessed be He, nodded His head and accepted the blessing.

This event teaches us that you should not take the blessing of an ordinary person lightly. If God asked for and accepted a man's blessing, all the more so that a man must value the blessing of another man. [Berakhot 7a]

The blessings that humans can give to one another are powerful. God asked in this Talmudic tale for a blessing from Rabbi

Yishmael. I read this as the ultimate sharing of power; humans are partners with God, caretakers of God's world. In this world, with this human responsibility, we have the authority and the obligation to make ethical use of power, no matter our discomfort. Our lives and the future of our people depend on it.

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