

The Use and Abuse of Jewish Power



WHEN CHAIM NACHMAN BIALIK said, “We will be a normal state when we have the first Hebrew prostitute, the first Hebrew thief, and the first Hebrew policeman,” he was also saying that a Jewish state would require normal powers as well. But Bialik lived in the first age of the Zionist project and died before the Second World War. It was still possible then for poets to dream of more peaceful circumstances for Israel’s birth.

The grim reality is that Israel will never be a normal state, and there is nothing normal about Israel’s Jewish power. That is why the manner in which it is used—and in which its use will be judged—cannot easily be measured against the way in which power is used by other nations.

A sovereign Jewish state was always going to involve powers to which Jews were unaccustomed. Not just the quaint idea of a Hebrew policeman or a Hebrew prison or even a Hebrew air

force—it would also demand darker powers. And these powers would have to be different from those of other governments. Because a vulnerable nation, without much in the way of natural resources or natural allies, and with neighbors bent on not just its defeat but its elimination, would need to acquire powers that were incommensurate to its size and alien to its traditions.

Take Jewish nuclear power. The “textile plant” near Dimona was not built as part of a war effort, as in the U.S. and British nuclear programs; or to achieve world-power status, as in the cases of the Soviet Union and China; or to achieve regional military balance, as in the case of India and Pakistan. For Israel, nuclear power is an insurance policy, a matter of guaranteeing survival.

Israel has never used this power to bully its neighbors, even implicitly, or to deter conventional attacks. This isn’t what Ben-Gurion intended it for. That’s why Israel maintains a policy of “nuclear opacity,” because it isn’t a regular nuclear power.

The same goes for Israel’s other nuclear policy, the Begin doctrine, in the service of which Israel has destroyed Arab nuclear reactors in Iraq and Syria while launching a massive, not-so-covert campaign against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. Ensuring that no other nation in the Middle East acquires a nuclear weapon is not about ensuring Israel’s regional dominance. It is about removing an intolerable threat to Israel’s very existence. Unlike the United States, the Jewish state can’t rely on mutually assured destruction as a deterrent: The desire to destroy the Jews lies beyond the realms of reason and realpolitik.

Benjamin Netanyahu, the now-former prime minister, has been the Israeli leader most comfortable with wielding Jewish power. Perhaps too comfortable. Netanyahu has considered, and argued in private, that less nuclear opacity would make for a more powerful deterrent. Thankfully, more cautious heads prevailed on this argument. To use this type of Jewish power in a less opaque manner could easily lead to its abuse.

Just as there is nothing normal about Jewish power, there is nothing inherently immoral about it, either. On the contrary, in the shadow of the Holocaust, no other form of power could be more moral.

When World War II ended and much of the organized Jewish world rushed to Europe to assist the survivors of the Holocaust, David Ben-Gurion went in the opposite direction—from Mandatory Palestine to New York. On July 1, 1945, at a meeting in the apartment of Rudolf Sonneborn, Israel's founding father persuaded 18 wealthy American Jews to fund the purchase of arms and materiel to equip a Jewish army. "The Sonneborn Institute" ensured that, when the time came to declare Israel's independence, the Jews of Palestine would not meet the same terrible fate as the Jews of Europe.

The speed and extent to which the Jewish state has now accumulated power would astonish and thrill the men who met in Sonneborn's apartment. Israel did so because Ben-Gurion built the institutions of power according to an overarching plan: not just the instruments of hard power, such as an army, an arms industry, and an intelligence service, but also those of soft power, including a scientific establishment, a world-class diplomatic corps, even an international-assistance program for less-developed countries.

All this was imperative because, unlike the hundred-odd countries that were granted their independence after World War II, Israel's existence has always been in question. Survival required power, autonomous and significant power, not the benign consent of foreign nations.

Today, some Jews who say they are expressing anger at Israeli policies seem instead to have descended into feelings of shame about Jews wielding power at all. They seem to have internalized anti-semitic myths fabricated to justify our murder; they live in a state of constant anxiety lest the projection of actual Jewish power give those myths retroactive credence.

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From this we get fashionable concepts such as "Jewish privilege," a term that should be considered absurd if not obscene. Who, exactly, is privileged? Our parents and grandparents (some of them still with us today) who had been marked down for destruction, who were slaves, not just metaphorically, but who actually carried on their arms and chests numbers and letters branded on them by their slave owners? Or the half of Israeli Jews who are either themselves, or descended from, Jews who were persecuted and driven from their homes in Muslim countries, even after the Holocaust? Or the millions of Jews who grew up in postwar Eastern Europe, who were discriminated against and forced to hide their Jewish heritage under Communism? That some Jews, especially in America, have escaped such horrors should not blind us—or them—to the realities of recent Jewish persecution.

For all Jews, who depend (or may eventually come to depend) on the security of a sovereign Israeli state, Jewish power is an unparalleled blessing.

Certainty and confidence in the moral justification of our power does not mean power can't or won't be abused. That is the nature

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of power. Jews, while unaccustomed to having and using power, are just as susceptible as others to abusing it.

Let's state this as plainly as possible: Israel's treatment of Palestinians is an abuse of Jewish power. Regardless of the historic arguments over the responsibility for the conflict and the Palestinian plight, it is a present and ongoing injustice. Jewish power holds sway over the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean and underpins that injustice. Insisting on the moral foundation of Jewish power cannot erase the reality of its abuse.

The abuse exists in the chronic and systematic inequality of Israel's own Palestinian citizens. Jewish power enforces the brutal policing and military occupation of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and in the West Bank, the continuing blockade of the Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip, and the denial of Palestinian statehood.

Israeli claims that it was the decisions of the Palestinians' leaders and their cynical exploitation by other Arab regimes that led to the current status quo are true. But the validity of these claims does not change the reality that Jewish soldiers, Jewish police, and Jewish arms are committing these abuses. With power comes responsibility.

True, dozens of countries are currently carrying out much worse abuses of human and civil rights, including many of those accusing Israel. In few cases is "whataboutism" more warranted than in international criticism of Israel. Nevertheless, Jews should be

holding our own Jewish power to a far higher standard because it is ours — because it was created for a higher purpose than pure security or self-aggrandizement. We owe it to ourselves to make a much better effort to avoid abusing Jewish power so we can justify it to ourselves and our children, irrespective of a hypocritical world that stood aside, and still often does, when Jews are victims.

That is why we must try much harder to avoid using our power in a way that victimizes others.

For decades, the case made against the occupation was that it was harmful for Israel's interests: that if Israelis didn't make the necessary concessions to reach a solution of the conflict, they would suffer a "diplomatic tsunami" of boycotts and sanctions; that Israel's economy could never truly prosper until a solution was achieved; and that, until peace was reached with Palestinians, Israel would never reach peace with its other neighbors.

The past 12 years under Netanyahu have demonstrated how false those predictions were. Netanyahu understood that Israel's Jewish power could shield it from the tsunami; that the moralizers of the West were unwilling to exert any real pressure on Israel; that the world has other priorities; and that the progressive Left might be influential in the media and academia, but it didn't hold much sway in terms of actual policy. Meanwhile, Israel's ties flourished with countries, including Arab countries, that admired Jewish power and didn't particularly care whether it was being abused.

Within Israel, the center Left, which used to call itself the "Peace Camp," has yet to come up with an argument for ending the occupation that is a better alternative than the one based on international pressure forcing Israel to do so. In the recent series of four election campaigns, the Palestinian issue was almost totally absent from Israeli political discourse, replaced by the campaign to remove Netanyahu and end his serial abuse of

prime-ministerial power (which is not the same as Jewish power).

This was a worthy cause. Now that it has been won, different arguments have to be articulated.

The new narrative of the Israeli Left will have to acknowledge that waiting for serious external pressure on Israel to solve the conflict will accomplish nothing except paralyze the Left for yet another generation. Instead, the Left will have to make both the pragmatic and moral case against perpetuating a situation in which Israel lives in various levels of constant conflict—or, rather, *conflicts*—with its Palestinian neighbors.

In other words, it has to stop talking about Israel's interests and start talking about its character, its constitution, its ethics, and its highest aspirations.

Right now, Israel is trapped by four simultaneous conflicts with Palestinians: first, with Israel's Palestinian citizens; second, with Palestinians living in East Jerusalem; third, with the Palestinians of the West Bank; finally, with the Palestinians of Gaza.

The last time all four of these separate Palestinian communities rose up together against Israel was at the start of the second intifada, in October 2000. In May 2021 it nearly happened again, as violent clashes with police in East Jerusalem were used by Hamas in Gaza as a pretext to launch thousands of rockets at Israel, while a wave of Arab attacks against Jewish homes and synagogues in Israel's "mixed" cities was met by groups of Jewish vigilantes carrying out attacks of their own. Only the West Bank, where the local Palestinian population is kept in a sullen truce by the self-interested security apparatus of the Palestinian Authority, was relatively calm.

The Israeli Left's argument must be that using Jewish power to bully millions of Palestinians into submission is ultimately self-defeating. Continuing to ricochet between destabilizing rounds of warfare is not a long-term solution. Israel will win each of these rounds, even when all four fronts with the Palestinians blow up at the same time, as will undoubtedly happen one day. It has sufficient Jewish power to survive this conflict and to continue prospering in between bouts.

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But the price it pays is not just varying periods of damaging paralysis. The Jewish power that ensures Israel's survival was not intended to perpetuate the subjugation of another nation. Abuse of power harms those wielding the power. A society whose young people spend years of their lives in violent suppression of the neighboring society will be debased by it as well. This is true whether they are on the front line of police and military operations, or sitting in the operations-rooms directing drone strikes, or in intelligence-gathering centers monitoring intimate conversations. It is a steady and inevitable moral erosion. That is the price being paid by generations of Israelis.

A belief in the moral justification of Jewish power must come with a commitment to exploring every alternative to using it in such self-destructive fashion. That—and not the self-abasing claims of America's Jewish progressive Left, which seeks to project America's historical experiences and culture wars on the Middle East—must be the argument of the Israeli Left going forward.

No one who has any true historical consciousness can claim that the acquisition of Jewish power was anything but necessary and

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justified. But the darker, if necessary, sides of Jewish power have always presented stark moral dilemmas. Isaiah and Jeremiah and the later prophets of the Tanakh who lived in times of evil, idolatrous kings in the days of the First Temple didn't dispute the need for Jewish power—but they also refused to remain silent over its abuse. Nor did they need the prompting of faraway cousins to lambaste those in power.

And not just them. The rabbis of the Talmud (Yoma 22b) discussed at length the many mistakes and cruelties of the two first kings of the Jews, Saul and David, the father figures of Jewish power. Why did David's kingdom continue, while Saul's did not? Because of David's imperfect ancestry—which lent him a kind of humility. “Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: One appoints a leader over the community only if he has a box full of creeping animals hanging behind him, so that if he exhibits a haughty attitude toward the community, one can say to him: Turn behind you and be reminded of your humble roots.” A leader needs to be accountable, not impeccable.

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak was a member of the last generation of the Mishnaic *tannaim*. He grew up in a Land of Israel that had already been ravaged twice by the Romans—first in the conquest that destroyed the Second Temple, and then again during the Bar Kochba revolt. The great exile had already begun, and soon the scholars of the Talmud themselves would emi-

grate to continue their discussions in the yeshivas of Babylon.

But Shimon's generation was still close enough to the last doomed era of Jewish sovereignty and Jewish power. They were only too aware of the many dangerous ways bad kings could abuse their Jewish power—and also of the total destruction that will befall us if there is no Jewish power. *