

LIGHT UNTO THE NATIONS

What does it mean for Israel to be a “light”? Early commentary on the famous line from Isaiah emphasized that Israel would do its work in the world by following the Torah — the ultimate source of light. Later, the Reform movement emphasized Israel’s exemplary, ethical role, subtly altering the original Hebrew from “L’Ohr Goyim” (as a light of nations) to “Ohr LaGoyim” (“a light unto the nations”). The idea found its greatest modern exponent in David Ben-Gurion, who often spoke of the Jewish state as a moral beacon.

Whether as a nation that dwells apart or a nation on a mission, Jews generally share the conviction that Israel should stand for certain ethical principles — and be judged according to them. For this issue of *SAPIR*, we asked 13 diverse thinkers and doers to offer a brief comment about what the phrase “a light unto the nations” means to them when it comes to Israel today. Their responses are to be found between the longer articles in this issue.

—The Editors

I the LORD, in My grace, have summoned you,
And I have grasped you by the hand.
I created you, and appointed you
A covenant people, a light of nations—
Opening eyes deprived of light,
Rescuing prisoners from confinement,
From the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

—Isaiah 42: 6–7



אֲנִי יְהוָה קָרָאתִיךָ בְּצֶדֶק וְאַחֲזַנְךָ בְּיָמֶיךָ
וְאַצְרֶךָ וְאַתְּנֶנֶה לְבְרִית עִם לְאוּר גּוֹיִם:
לְפָקֹחַ עֵינַיִם עֲוֵרוֹת לְהוֹצִיא מִמִּסְגֵּר אֲסִיר
מִבֵּית כָּלָא לְשֹׁבֵי חֶשֶׁד:
— יִשְׁעִיהוּ מ"ב: ו-ז



A PHOENIX PURSUED BY ARSONISTS

There is a rabbinic legend that when the Temple was being destroyed and flames engulfed the structure, the high priest took the key that opened the Holy of Holies and desperately flung it into the sky. Out of the clouds came a giant hand that closed over the key and drew it back into the sky to be returned when the Temple is rebuilt (Ta'anit 29a). Many years ago, my father told me to notice what the high priest did not throw into the sky — The Torah.

The Jewish people are a phoenix pursued by arsonists. Despite the recurrent flames, we continued to cherish the ideals of that Torah. Again and again we turned flames into a source of illumination like the biblical pillar of fire in the dark of the desert, forging meaning from loss and kindling sparks of holiness amid destruction.

Survival alone is not success. With its stunning accomplishments in almost every area of human endeavor, this tiny land renewed its millennial promise. The modern state proved yet again what the high priest knew in ancient Israel and the poet Heine said in 19th-century Germany: Freedom speaks with a Hebrew accent. The words and the message have lost none of their power. And the flames that have surrounded Israel are returned as light unto the nations of the world.

—RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Max Webb Senior Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles



THE PROMISED LAND OF ALL PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES



When I think of Israel, I realize that it's more than a nation-state or even a people. Israel is a promise. And while Israel was promised to the Jewish people, Israel is the promised land of all people — Jews and Gentiles alike — who believe that God keeps his promises.

When my great-grandmother Agnes, born a sharecropper in Georgia as the granddaughter of slaves, used to read the pages of our family Bible, she knew that God was real. That God was active. That God always wins.

Israel has served as the light of the world — proof positive that God keeps his promises. God made a promise to a person, to a people, and to a place. And he made another promise to the rest of us. He promised to bless those who bless Israel.

I hope we will make his promise our purpose. I hope that together we will recommit ourselves to not staying silent, to not looking away. After all, Israel is about us, too. I pray that we remember the promise and serve each of our purposes in supporting Israel and the Jewish people. If we walk away from Israel, if we fail to heed what the Almighty God decreed to his prophets and heroes more than 3,000 years ago, then we do so at our own peril, because God always keeps his promises.

—DANA W. WHITE

*head of Global Strategic Advisory, Ankura Consulting, and
former assistant to the secretary of defense for public affairs*



A NATION CAPABLE OF LIGHTING UP THE DARK

There is a famous teaching attributed to the 19th-century Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim that has stayed with me since I learned it as a kid. Bunim teaches that every person should keep two scraps of paper in her pockets. On one scrap, in one pocket, a line from Tractate Sanhedrin: The whole world was created just for me. On the other scrap, in another pocket, Abraham's words from Genesis 18:27: I am but dust and ashes.

In low moments, we need the Talmud to remind us that for our sake the world was made. At other times, we need Bereshit to bring us back down to Earth.

When it comes to Israel, I have two comparable scraps.

In one pocket, I have the line attributed to David Ben-Gurion (though perhaps it is apocryphal): "When Israel has prostitutes and thieves, we'll be a state just like any other."

And in the other, I have the Prophet Isaiah: "I will also make you a light of nations, that My salvation may reach the ends of the earth."

On the one hand, a nation like any other—screwing one another, screwing it all up. On the other, a Jewish state set apart—an ancient promise by God to the people of Israel. On the one hand, a reminder that we Jews are just people. On the other, an aspiration as high as the heavens—a vision of a nation capable of lighting up the dark.

These days, like so many Jews in Israel and around the world, I find myself reaching for the pocket with Isaiah's words, praying that Israel can make itself worthy of that vow.

—BARI WEISS
founder of The Free Press



THE TEST OF JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY IS THE TREATMENT OF STRANGERS

It is, after all, a modest ambition: not *the* light, just a light, one of the lights. And, yes, that was and is my hope for the still-new Jewish state. I thought, along with many of my Labor and liberal Zionist friends, that the experience of statelessness, of persecution, expulsion, and migration, would lead the Jews to create an exemplary state. But I also had a second Zionist hope, produced by the same historical experience: to have a state like all the other states — finally, to be normal. Normality has been achieved, and I don't want to underestimate its importance. But Israel's light is dim.

There are many reasons for that, mostly having to do with “the conflict.” I want to suggest a reason from our history. Statelessness did not mean the absence of politics or even of the key political experience of ruling and being ruled. Jews ruled, always precariously, in their own autonomous or semiautonomous communities — the *kehillot* of medieval and early-modern times. But they ruled only over fellow Jews; they were responsible only for one another. The achievement of statehood requires ruling over and along with strangers. Every normal nation has done that, well or badly, mostly badly. Israeli Jews are new to the concern for “others” that is required of those who rule a state. Many of them have not taken on, have refused to take on, that concern. Hence the dim light.

The test of Jewish sovereignty, as of any other sovereignty, is the treatment of strangers — the willingness to live with the “others” on terms of equality. Any nation-state that meets that test will be a light unto the nations. My friends in Israel today are struggling to meet the test. I pray for their success.

—MICHAEL WALZER
*professor emeritus at Princeton University
and editor emeritus of Dissent magazine*



A FAIR AND SECURE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT

For Israel to become a light unto the nations, it must first be a light unto itself. It must have an exemplary form of governance and provide justice and opportunity to all. It should show compassion toward its neighbors and the world and be a committed partner in the protection of our planet, as well as its own territories and heritage.

Israel has cohabited with the Palestinians for many years. So its first test will be to negotiate a government that provides justice, security, and autonomy to both peoples. Today's situation was inflicted upon Israel; but given the asymmetry of power, Israel should take the initiative in seeking a fair and secure resolution of the conflict.

Neither one nor two states will work. We need a federation of two states with self-government for each, bonded together by a negotiated constitution that provides for joint security and fair resource allocation to address the needs of each people. The constitution cannot fall short of the American model in protecting individual rights and providing equality for all under the law. If Israel can cross this milestone in the remaining 25 years of its first century, it will indeed become a light to the nations — a model of justice as preached by the prophets.

Israel has made enormous contributions in agriculture, science, technology, medicine, and the arts. The new Israel/Palestine would extend these achievements to the entire population, with opportunities for citizens of any religious persuasion and practice or none, through a social contract emphasizing equality and compassion for all.

Such an entity will, in time, draw in its regional neighbors and thereby contribute to a Middle Eastern renaissance. But Israel will never be a light to the nations if either people is deprived of its Promised Land.

—MOSHE SAFDIE

*architect whose works include Habitat 67 in Montreal and
the Yad Vashem Holocaust History Museum in Jerusalem*



THE POWER OF BELIEF

If you will it, it is no dream. Theodor Herzl's wise words echo down the ages, reminding us of man's agency in the achievement of individual and collective dreams. We are purpose-driven beings, and the greatest power within us is activated when we endeavor to bring the desires of our heart into manifest reality. That power is magnified exponentially when like minds join in the effort. Everything becomes possible.


As an African American, when I traveled to Israel for the first time in 2009, I was thunderstruck. I saw in the Jewish state the power of belief, a sublime embodiment of all the metaphysical ideals I hold dear. Inspired by Herzl and many other Zionist thinkers, a grand vision of peoplehood, self-determination, and democratic values literally made the desert bloom. In the face of all the obstacles of the natural world and the opposition of bitter enemies, the Jewish people established their long-prophesied homeland. Their success serves as a powerful example to all marginalized peoples of what can be achieved through bold imagination, determined effort, and an unfettered will. Herzl himself would be awed by the miracle of modern-day Israel.

—DARIUS JONES

*founder and president of the
National Black Empowerment Council*



THE UNCEASING EMPHASIS ON QUESTIONING

f all the miracles known to Jews — the burning bush, the parting of the waters, the rain of manna from the sky — the greatest of all was made not by God but by the mortals who envisioned a country out of only despair. A people who had hardly ever lived as equal citizens, or known a democracy, somehow created one. Centuries of separation from their homeland, and from one another, did not give rise to insuperable divisions among them. From Jerusalem to Babylon, opinions did diverge yet never caused a rift that led to a permanent rupture. The cure to sectarianism, it turns out, is a collective commitment to, and belief in, the importance of debate. It is in the unceasing emphasis on questioning, even quibbling over, ideas, if only to master the arts of tolerance and temperance.

Like the self, a nation contains multitudes, which it must harness in order to thrive. That is what the unbeliever Herzl did to persuade even the believers to answer his call and return to their Promised Land. Now, Israel stands at the threshold where America stood in 1838, when Lincoln reassured his Lyceum audience that America was no longer an undecided experiment. Israel, too, is a successful state whose gravest threat comes not from without, but from within. It comes from the “men of ambition” who, in pursuit of distinction or driven by zeal, may wish to tear down the glorious legacy of its founders and their principles. By reason and temperance, by unimpeachable morals, by keeping in sharp focus the memory of the suffering upon which the nation stands, and by committing to reduce the suffering of other nations, Israel can continue to be a lighthouse in a world that is increasingly imperiled by the tempest of extremism.

—ROYA HAKAKIAN

*author, among other books, of Journey from the Land of No:
A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*



SHINING A LIGHT ON A DARKENING WORLD

Israel should not claim to be a “light unto the nations,” any more than Jews should claim to be the “chosen people.” These claims of exceptionalism invite the application of a double standard, which has long been weaponized against Israel and the Jewish people. The central goal of Zionism, after all, was to *normalize* the Jewish people.

At the same time, the Jewish state has, through its behavior, earned the right to be deemed a light unto the nations. But that is an encomium that others should apply to it.

Consider the challenges faced in the creation of the state after two millennia of dispersion and wandering. Jews lacked a common culture, ethnicity, and language. They shared only a religion, a language of prayer, and an ancient history.

In Israel, the Jewish people developed a new culture, modernized the language, and adapted to their different ethnicities. Having barely survived genocide, they beat back invaders and developed a powerful military. Beginning as an agrarian economy, they developed into a world-class, start-up nation.

Israel is still a work in progress. But no nation — including the United States, which was a slaveholding republic for its first 89 years — has contributed more to the world in its first 75 years than Israel. And despite facing threats to its survival, it has maintained a high, if imperfect, standard of civil liberties, human rights, and adherence to the rule of law.

Israel deserves to be commended, not condemned, by the nations for shining a light on a darkening world.

—ALAN DERSHOWITZ,
*author, most recently, of Get Trump: The Threat to Civil
Liberties, Due Process, and Our Constitutional Rule of Law*



TO RECOGNIZE AND REALIZE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Israel sits today at the intersection of three challenges. There is the challenge to her internal resiliency, to her relations as a nation-state with global Jewry, and to her standing as an equal member in the family of nations. It's a moment that asks her citizens to recognize and realize individual and collective responsibility within a Jewish national framework; to determine a vibrant Jewish national character without curtailing the freedom of any of her citizens; to connect with and reflect universal principles from a clear place of a particular identity.

We live at a time when virtual clamor fuels and is fueled by real-world events. It is critical to diagnose root causes rather than react to symptoms. Israel's Declaration of Independence provides a compass for our nation-building journey. After millennia of exile and persecution, we are at a miraculous moment of return for the Jews, an archetypal indigenous people, to our ancestral homeland. We are also committed to equality for all our citizens. We must continue our generation's role in this historic effort, recognizing Israel's imperfections as we celebrate her accomplishments.

We face these triple challenges with a triple commitment. First, anchored in the values and principles of our founding document, we bind ourselves to the responsibility to diagnose and heal internal difficulties. Second, we aim to strengthen our relationship with global Jewry. And third, we aspire to stand proudly among other nations in a fractured world. Our principles are our light unto our own nation and to others, as we continue our journey to fulfill our mission and renew our hope — our *Hatikvah* — actively and courageously.

—MICHAL COTLER-WUNSH

former member of the Knesset for the Blue and White Party

FIVE PERCENT BETTER THAN OTHER COUNTRIES

It was shortly after the first Lebanon War when I attended a class led by Rabbi Yitz Greenberg in Toronto. He asked whether we thought Israel was still a light unto the nations. I found the question shocking. I had never imagined the war as an indicator that Israel had lost the moral high ground.

But Rav Yitz was correct that it was the first time that Israel had felt more the Goliath than the David. He went on to say that a moral army is not one that doesn't kill civilians during wartime. All armies kill civilians. That is one of the reasons we need to avoid wars unless they are defensive. A moral army is one that minimizes the number of civilians it kills. If the Israeli army is 5 percent more moral than its peers (and Rav Yitz emphatically believed it was), it will be a light unto the nations. If it is 25 percent better, it will bring the Messiah.

But if it's 50 percent more moral? It will be destroyed. Too many expect a perfect Israel, aghast at every shortfall, ready to pounce at any stumble. But a perfect Israel cannot survive among the nations. How about an Israel that is 5 percent better than other countries?

Israel has spent 75 years proving that 5 percent is achievable. It has more museums per capita than any other country. It had a woman as its prime minister in 1969. It took in Vietnamese boat people when much of the world was indifferent to their fate. It airlifted 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 36 hours. In the pandemic, it made vaccines available to the entire population in a way that was a model for the world. It was one of the first countries to have trained volunteers on the ground in Turkey after a devastating earthquake earlier this year.

Can Israel do better? She can and she will. While I'm a tough grader, this 5 percent is an easy call.

—MARK CHARENDOFF
publisher of SAPIR

WHAT OBSTACLE CAN'T BE OVERCOME?

Before Israel was a country, it was a dream. My sister Marjorie and I learned that from our parents, whose generation knew the horrors of World War II. The creation of Israel was proof that with enough determination and faith in our convictions, we could create the world we want for our children, centered on the values that we cherish here at home: freedom, democracy, and equality.

Israel has been a light unto the world because, like the Lady in the New York Harbor, it has been a Mother of Exiles to one of history's most persecuted peoples and a beacon of hope that peace and prosperity can triumph over bloodshed and bigotry.

Maybe the Jewish history we learned growing up led me to internalize a lesson that has always guided my life: Tomorrow can be better than today, and we have a special obligation to make it so. That includes sharing the dream of Israel with new generations. Rising antisemitism in both American political parties makes that responsibility even more urgent.

The spirit of optimism and obligation that has shaped Jewish history also helps to make Israel a force for progress and an engine of invention, commerce, and civic innovation. Bloomberg Philanthropies is glad to be supporting that progress in a variety of ways, including through the Bloomberg-Sagol Center for City Leadership at Tel Aviv University.

For so many of us in the U.S. and around the world, it has been difficult to watch Israel suffer through unprecedented domestic political upheaval. A nation that faces so many threats on its borders can ill afford deep divisions within them, and the world can ill afford a weakened Israel. But I remain optimistic about its future. After all, if the dream of Israel can be realized, what obstacle can't be overcome?

—MICHAEL R. BLOOMBERG

*founder of Bloomberg LP and Bloomberg Philanthropies
and former mayor of New York City*

ONE OF THE GRANDEST ACTS OF JEWISH RESISTANCE

Never confuse what Israel is and what its people aspire to become with what others want it to be. As David Nirenberg puts it in his magisterial *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, Jews have served for centuries as an idea for others to define themselves against — “a category, a set of ideas and attributes with which non-Jews can make sense of and criticize their world.” So, too, with Israel. For 75 years, Israel has captured the world’s imagination, its lovers and enemies alike demanding that it serve as an illuminating emblem.

Lovers of Israel see a historic dream fulfilled, the Promised Land that a young Paul Newman conquered on-screen in *Exodus*. Its enemies see a demonic nightmare, projecting upon it whatever particular evil they hate most. But Israel and its people have not been and will never be a uniform light for others’ convenience. The magnificent miracle of Israel is precisely that it cannot be simplified or categorized, that its people insist on the self-determination to craft their own story.

The miracle is its diversity, its complexity, its mixture: of East and West, indigeneity and migration, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, secular and religious, powerful and vulnerable, sacred and profane, Start-Up Nation and Western Wall, democracy and intractable conflict, intense and carefree, ancient and youthful.

Israel is one of the grandest acts of Jewish resistance: a refusal to be a neat and convenient light to fit someone else’s narrative.

Those of us who have intertwined our fates with Israel must continue fighting for it to indeed live up to our prophetic aspirations to be a light to the nations. But on our own terms — multivocal, covenantal, so lovingly ours, and so joyfully human that it can never be reduced to a single story.

—MIJAL BITTON

*scholar in residence at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America,
and the Rosh Kehilla of the Downtown Minyan in New York City*

THE LIGHT HAS DIMMED

Israel and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were both born in 1948 — wings of a phoenix that rose from the ashes of Auschwitz, symbols of regret of a world shamefully chastened.

While Israel and the Declaration were historically fused as compensatory justice for Jews, they also became symbols for justice of a more universal kind. Israel was looked to as a symbol that democratic values can flourish even in an environment thick with siege and extremism. It was a “light unto the nations.” The Declaration was looked to as a symbol that the international community remained dedicated to the ideal of human rights and justice for all.

Seventy-five years later, it is worth reflecting on how securely the commitment to tolerance is fastened to the spirit of our times. For me, not securely enough. It has been particularly disturbing to watch this play out in Israel, to see the demonization of Israel’s courageous and internationally respected Supreme Court. It is disturbing not because judges should not be criticized, but because what is really going on is a decades-long struggle by the political Right to pry Israel’s soul away from the commitment to democratic rights and freedoms that inspired its creation in 1948. The Right is forgetting what Israel is for and why.

Nothing has changed about why Israel matters. If anything, it matters even more in a global moral climate dangerously polluted by antisemitism. But what *has* changed is one government’s failure to remember.

I was born in a displaced persons camp in Germany to parents who survived the Holocaust. It was two years before Israel and the Universal Declaration were born, but they became my lifelong touchstones. I will never give up on either, but the light has dimmed.

—ROSALIE SILBERMAN ABELLA
*visiting professor at Harvard Law School and
retired justice of the Canadian Supreme Court*