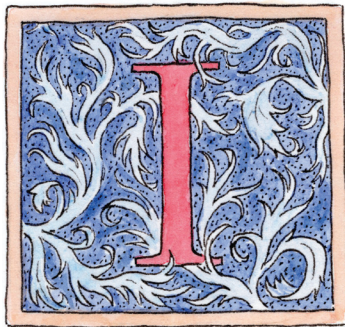


EINAT WILF

Israel Is a Liberator



IN LIBERATING the Jews, Zionism blessed and cursed them. It blessed the Jews with responsibility. It cursed the Jews with responsibility. With Israel, the sovereign state that Zionism brought about, Jews were now free to make the choices that would shape their fate. Zionism had liberated sovereign Jews to make good and bad choices—to be the best, the worst, or the mediocre versions of themselves.

Zionism liberated Jews by burdening them with power while depriving them of the comforts of blame. Possessing the collective power and authority to make decisions, sovereign Jews had to accept that the consequences of their decisions, smart or stupid, would be laid squarely at their door. Sovereign Jews would no longer be able to blame the czar, the antisemitic ruler, or the goyim, for their plight. Most Zionists could no longer even blame God. What Israel is, what Israel has become, the good, the bad, and the ugly, is who Jews are as a free people.

This realization is deeply troubling to some Jews. Powerlessness has its temptations. Those who have forgotten what it is actually like to be powerless can easily imagine it as a morally pristine condition. There is comfort in that imagining. But there is no truth in it. Without power, morality is an atrophied muscle. Only when one is free to exercise power can one even begin to be a fully moral being.

To be moral is not to be “good” or “nice.” To be moral is to venture daily into life, straining to make the best choices under circumstances that rarely if ever present a simple, “good” path. Jewish morality is not a theory found in the Book, nor in its interpretative texts. Jewish morality is found daily in the manner by which Jews seek to live as fully sovereign people burdened with power and its associated responsibility.

By giving them the power to make choices, Zionism liberated Jews to be complete moral beings, fulfilling the true moral promise of Judaism. But Zionism had an even more ambitious goal: liberating the societies that had long latched on to the ready temptation of scapegoating Jews for their plight.

The sociologist René Girard, who studied scapegoating, observed that societies in crisis ask two questions: What to do? Whom to blame? Societies that emerge well from crises emphasize action over scapegoating. But action is by no means the most attractive path, given the considerable comfort so many take in blaming others for their misfortune, in shaking the yoke of agency, in forgoing responsibility.

The Jews, as the world’s oldest and most reliable scapegoats, are keenly aware of this appeal. But when Jews, through Zionism, chose action over blame for themselves, they sought to liberate those who had indulged in the comforts of blaming them, so that they might devote themselves to improving their societies instead.

The idea that Jews had anything to do with the world's misfortunes was never true. But in giving Jews a sovereign home and thereby normalizing their political condition, Zionism sought to alleviate antisemitism if not eliminate it entirely. Unfortunately, rising anti-Zionism in the West, as well as in the Arab and Muslim world, presents itself to many as a respectable replacement for antisemitism. People will not readily let go of so useful a scapegoat.

Few individuals or societies live up to the ideal of a truly liberated life, accepting full responsibility for the choices they make. The pleasures of liberty are clear. But its burdens are easily forgotten. The paradox of liberty is that the responsibility it requires does not feel liberating at all in any obvious way. Liberty is the product of discipline, dedication, duty, and devotion — all of which involve a voluntary subordination of the spirit to something greater than itself. It is like the improvisation of a jazz pianist, who is only “free” to follow her musical inspiration because of the thousands of hours of practice that preceded her performance. The duties of liberty require deliberate, consistent, continuous uphill effort. Such effort is all too easily neglected in the pursuit of immediate pleasures, and on the not-so-rare occasions when such a pursuit yields misery, the temptations of retreating into powerlessness are always there.

On its 75th anniversary, Israel is contending with the price of liberty. The grand actions necessary to secure that liberty are mostly over — building the state, securing the state, ingathering the exiles. Jews in Israel must now contend with all the issues that they set aside during the long struggle for liberation. Long-neglected tensions between Arabs and Jews, between religion and state, between different immigrant groups, all are bubbling to the surface, demanding now to be addressed. In the process of facing these issues, sovereign Jews will make good and bad choices, smart and stupid decisions, and many mediocre ones.

Jews can take pride in the idea that even our bad choices and stupid decisions are very much our own, even if we're not always proud of the choices and decisions themselves. But a nagging concern remains. How many bad decisions can the Jewish people afford? How many stupid choices can we make before we risk the State of Israel and the entire Zionist enterprise? And if we do end up making too many bad decisions and stupid choices, will Judaism ever recover from the fall of the third Jewish commonwealth? Would the dream of reconstituting ourselves in the Land of Israel hold us together as one people once again, if the fulfilled promise were devastated once more? It took less than a century to rebuild the second commonwealth after the loss of the first one. It took 20 centuries to rebuild the third commonwealth after the loss of the second one. If we forfeit the third commonwealth, 20 centuries will not be enough. Perhaps no number of centuries would be enough.



Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying that the people of a newly independent America had a republic, “if you can keep it.” To Thomas Jefferson is attributed the caution that “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” David Ben-Gurion is thought to have said that the success of the Jewish state could be assessed only after seven decades. Their knowledge of history and human nature instructed all three men in the tenuous nature of liberty and the heavy burden it places on the liberated to maintain it. And so, on Israel’s 75th anniversary, we can imagine a Benjamin Ben-Gurion telling the people of Israel and the Jewish people around the world, “A Jewish state, if you can keep it.” *

EINAT WILF is the author of *We Should All be Zionists: Essays on the Jewish State and the Path to Peace* (2022) and a former member of the Israeli Knesset on behalf of the Labor Party.