

ANSHEL PFEFFER

# Israel Is More Than Enough



DAYENU,’ the Passover song, lists the litany of miracles that led from captivity in Egypt to the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. Taken on its own, the song suggests, each divine intervention would have been cause enough for grateful wonder. But “Dayenu” is not just an inventory of blessings. In sequence, the miracles add up to a story—of progressive confidence and agency—as well as a journey from slavery to sovereignty.

As such, “Dayenu” is not just a song about the Exodus. It is a blueprint for the story of Israel.

The first *dayenu* moment of the modern era occurred 75 years ago, when David Ben-Gurion, standing in the old Tel Aviv Museum of Art, proclaimed the foundation of the first independent Jewish state since the days of the Maccabean kingdom. A mere three years sep-

arated that moment from the Nazi slave camps that had wiped out fully a third of the Jewish people. To many survivors, the mere proclamation must have seemed fantastical. On that euphoric afternoon in May 1948, not long before the onset of Shabbat, Israel exceeded expectations almost in the moment it came into existence. Refugees now had a haven. Survivors had a cause for which to live and sometimes to die. That was enough.



As the British high commissioner departed before midnight on a warship from Haifa, he left the fledgling state in the care of a leader with authoritarian tendencies: Ben-Gurion already held an iron grip over the Yishuv's collectivized economy and social services. The Yishuv was riven by divisions among socialists, Revisionists, and diverse religious communities. It was already at war with the local Arab population. Soon, they would be joined by invading Arab armies.

Most histories of those first turbulent months focus on the hard-won War of Independence and the downfall and dispersal of Arab inhabitants. In doing so, they miss just how remarkable the emergence of democracy in Israel was. The first elections were held even before there were official cease-fires on all fronts. The participation of all communities, including the remaining Arab-Israelis and the non-Zionist ultra-Orthodox, was also notable.

It should be possible to recognize the miracle of Israeli democracy while noting flaws such as the decades-long dominance of Ben-Gurion's Mapai Party, the messy military rule over Arab citizens, which lasted until 1966, or the first Knesset's failure to draft a constitution. The new Israelis, who had either grown up under British rule or arrived from Eastern Europe and the Arab countries, had no democratic traditions to lean on, save the voluntary and often chaotic structures

of the Zionist movement. The founding party could have easily imposed a socialist dictatorship and would have had plenty of justification in the country's precarious state. And the generals of the Israel Defense Forces, the most respected and powerful institution of the new state, had ample opportunities to stage a takeover and replace the politicians in the name of a state of emergency. Menachem Begin and his fellow Revisionist leaders, rightly enraged at the heavy-handed and violent way in which their armed organizations had been demilitarized, could have remained underground and fought for primacy.

Instead, Begin accepted the rules, lost eight elections, and languished in opposition before coming to power in 1977. He put his trust in an electoral system that is often derided, even though it has provided Israel with that gift, rare not only in the Middle East but in many places around the world, of bloodless transitions of power.

Israeli political scientists give sober reasons for why the Jews instinctively established a democracy when they finally had their own state: Most obviously, they had lived as persecuted minorities. Yet things could so easily have gone the other way, as they did in nearly every other country that achieved independence in the postwar era. Amid the five elections of the five past years, it's easy to forget that that first election on January 25, 1949, was another *dayenu* moment.

And the *dayenus* kept coming.

Israel's legal system is certainly a *dayenu*. Despite failing to write a constitution, Israel has—at least as of this writing—a Supreme Court capable of holding the government to account and upholding freedom of speech and other civil rights. It has law-enforcement agencies capable of investigating and prosecuting prime ministers and presidents. It has courts and judges capable of preventing the security services from abusing their powers. It has the regulatory infrastructure and social climate without which a knowledge-based private sector could not have flourished.

Or immigration: How often do we stop to marvel at the absorption of millions of Jews from places as far afield as Yemen and Ethiopia, Iran and Iraq, the former Soviet Union and the United States, Italy and India, France and Romania, Argentina and Canada? Despite the terrible hardships many of the new arrivals suffered—involving injustices that fester to this day—our people’s aliyah is a triumph of our national story.

Or the IDF: Who would have predicted, on the eve of Israel’s founding, that a tiny nation of scholars and shopkeepers would create a formidable defense force as well as stunningly resourceful intelligence services? Today, it’s hard to picture Israel as anything but militarily dominant—a dominance that has left it with responsibility for millions of Palestinians and a share of the blame for the injustices they suffer. And yet for decades the specter of a weak and vulnerable country was real.

Or the economy: Even halfway through Israel’s current life span, the idea of an export-driven tech sector eliminating the massive trade deficit and boosting living standards to Western European levels was a fantasy. In the 1980s, experts felt that the best Israel could hope for was a bailout to keep itself afloat through triple-figure annual inflation. Any “investment” in an Israeli company by Diaspora Jews was a form of *tzedakah* with zero returns. That was the state of the Israeli economy, well into its fifth decade. Now outsiders come to Israel seeking brainpower, entrepreneurship, and outsized returns—certainly a *dayenu*, even if it comes with levels of inequality that have only made it more difficult to bridge widening income gaps.



Whether you ascribe these *dayenus* to the foresight and hard work of Israelis, to divine intervention, or to both, there is no guarantee they’ll keep coming. You don’t just get dealt royal flushes of *dayenus*. The

anonymous author of the Passover song had another message for us: With each billion-dollar sale of an Israeli start-up, Arab sheikhdom opening an embassy in Tel Aviv, or Iranian nuclear scientist mysteriously dying in a suburb of Tehran, it's all too easy to get a bit too used to *dayenus*. So easy, in fact, that in its 75th year, Israel's government threatens to squander them.

In any fine piece of liturgy, structure is as important as the words. "Dayenu" isn't just a shopping list of luxuries. It's a progression of miracles, a stairway to Zion, a warning against the temptation of skipping any of the steps. Relinquish a *dayenu* at your peril. Lose one and you jeopardize them all. \*

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