

ARIEL BEERY

Resilience Is a Threat

A new dream for the Zionist future



“WHAT I fear most,” longtime Israel activist and executive Jessica Ovadia shared with me on a call just after Iran’s massive air attack on Israel, “is that we will keep relying on our resilience.” She explained how, after the rockets and missiles and drones were shot down by Israel and its allies on April 13–14, a euphoria spread through her Jerusalem neighborhood. “We’ve gotten so used to being resilient, to being able to suffer through and bounce back, that we’re not asking: What’s the plan to prevent it from happening again?” It’s a version of confidence that appears bizarrely like complacency.

Simon Beninga, who taught finance and international business for many years at Tel Aviv University and Wharton, used to remark that our strengths are also our weaknesses. We Jews of the present day are obsessed with the apparent strength of our resilience. We survived

Pharaoh, the destruction of our Temples, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, we say—and today we are stronger for it.

This is not to suggest that resilience doesn't have its time and place—when the circumstances are temporary, the general trend is a positive one, when one needs to grin and bear it until the storm passes, allowing the arc of history to take its gradual turn. Once the time has passed, we've tended to make a humorous fetish of both our resilience and our obsession with it. "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat," the joke goes. When times are good, we laugh at our trauma-forged neuroses and express them through ritualized memory.

But there is something very un-temporary about our currently embattled state, and the arc is too long to see past. We are living through a moment when our overreliance on resilience is more than a weakness. It is a threat to the continued existence of Jewish peoplehood as we know it.

From Columbia to Colombia, from Manhattan to Malmo, the Jewish people are under siege for the crime of peoplehood. While individual Jews can accept the gospel of antiracist universalism and their place in the caste hierarchy of victims, their collective identity is under suspicion. As a nation committed to self-determination and equal status with all other national peoples, we have not been under this level of threat for nearly a century. With academia as the safest space for anti-Jewish forces, we must accept the real possibility that the siege could be multigenerational.

To rely on and celebrate our resilience to these trends is to imagine that, somehow, the leaders of tomorrow will wake up from their anti-Jewish fever dream and become philosemitic captains of industry and Israel-accepting heads of state. Resilience was why Columbia's Jewish professors and donors believed that students, including me, were overreacting when we testified to classroom anti-Zionism in the 2004 documentary *Columbia Unbecoming* and that it would pass like

any other fad rather than metastasize into the cancer it has become, threatening the Jewish people in the West. Resilience was the reason so many Jews stayed behind in Germany, Poland, and Italy as the Fascists of Europe began making plans and lists.

Lest we think a reliance on resilience is a Diaspora quirk, Israel is in its current predicament because of the same obsession. Resilience was behind the idea of “shrinking the conflict,” the conception that led our leaders to imagine that the State of Israel could remain Jewish and Democratic in the land between the river and the sea, a land that was quickly becoming neither majority Jewish nor majority democratic. Resilience was behind the justifications for allowing a thrice-indicted politician to serve as prime minister—people imagined that Israel’s judicial system was robust enough to oppose attempts to corrupt it in his favor. Resilience is why a genocidal yet democratically elected government in Gaza was permitted to continue its rule despite sparking conflict after conflict and carrying out attack after attack on Israeli civilians.



Zionism was and is a rejection of resilience, not an example of it. When Theodor Herzl called forth lovers of Zion from across the world to the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, he orchestrated a public declaration that the Jews would no longer bend to rising antisemitism; no longer depend on the Jewish ability to adapt to ill circumstance, to absorb the abuse of those who ruled over them; no longer content themselves to withstand the mutation of anti-Judaism into racialized antisemitism.

The Zionist movement developed a concept, a word, to describe its rejection of resilience, its unwillingness to bend and shelter together until the storm passes: “chalutziyut.”

The word “chalutz,” commonly translated as “pioneer,” derives from the verb “l’chaletz,” to extricate oneself, to pull out of a situation. It is the refusal to live inside an unacceptable reality. It is not about surviving the trials and tribulations of the moment out of a belief in the hope for a better future. It is a call to strike out anew toward a vision that is compelling yet unrefined. To pioneer ahead, with courage and grit, to build a future radically different from the present. To disrupt. To leave, if necessary, one’s land, one’s birthplace, one’s home, and build a new reality.

The difference between resilience and *chalutziyut* is the difference between surviving and thriving. Whereas resilience relies on the lessons and strength that come from our past, *chalutziyut* draws us toward a better future. It is about promise over circumstance.

The great challenge facing the Jews today is not to find comfort in our ability to survive this current wave; it is to imagine a future that does not necessitate recurring resilience and then to act to bring that future about. It is to envision and create a world for Israel as the spiritual center of what the prophet Isaiah might have called an *am olam*, an eternal people. To remember that, in the teaching of religious Zionist luminary Abraham Isaac Kook, we must not be “afraid of the long journey.” That journey requires us to find inspiration in the Zionist movements—religious, cultural, labor, and revisionist—that built our state to establish the foundations for rootedness in our homeland and become integrated into the nations as an enduring source of value for humanity.

We are regrettably bereft of such a vision at present. Today we are all will and no dream.

What might the dream look like? Israel’s current circumstance has turned it into a fortress. Fortresses are not meant to last forever and certainly can’t sustain an eternal people. The next aspiration of Zionism, the next Zionist dream, must be to transform our for-

gress into a campus, a platform for the world's *chalutzim*, Jews and non-Jews, to build a better world, one in which Israel is seen as the solution, not the problem. Such a dream leaves the utility of resilience behind, trading up for aspiration. This future, in the words of our sages, is not in heaven. It is in our hands, if we will it. *