

Zionism as a Method of Diversity

*Why the differences that divide us are
the key to our rebuilding*



THE JOB OF BEING Israel's president has a way of evading prediction. Yes, there have been astonishing political and geopolitical developments in Israel since I took office in mid-2021. But I don't mean the consecutive elections, the constitutional crisis, or even October 7 and everything that has come in its wake. I mean the basic paradoxes I meet in my daily encounters with real people and all the ways they give me hope for our future.

More than anything else, these paradoxes point to a nation in evolution. Take these three anecdotes of my presidency from recent months.

Scene one: I am on my way to pay another shiva call — one of more than a thousand that my wife, Michal, and I have attended since

October 7. Each story of a fallen soldier or a murdered civilian carries its own tale of grief and loss. Today's heartbreaking story is of Yitzhar Hofman, who has just been killed in northern Gaza. Yitzhar was a major in the IDF's elite Shaldag unit, but also an engineer who helped build the new National Library. I know that his parents were among the founders of Ofra, a Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria. On the way to the shiva, Michal and I learn that Yitzhar had settled with his own family in the northern community of Eshhar, a mixed religious and secular community in the Galilee where life is largely shared with the neighboring Bedouin Arab village of Arab al-Na'im. I know he had made his way straight to Kibbutz Be'eri on October 7, leaving his wife and two young children behind. And I know that he had insisted on heading back to battle after being injured. This was the man who, a few weeks later, had apologized to the people of Kibbutz Be'eri for having failed to save more of their community.

Another gem, plucked from the midst of life, as he showed up for his people.

I anticipate a conversation about Yitzhar's heroism and about the need to stay committed to the goals of the war. But it turns out that what his parents and siblings want me to know—what *he* was most proud of—was Yitzhar's humanity. In one of the fierce battles with terrorist battalions in Gaza, he had come across an elderly Palestinian woman who had been left behind in the confusion of battle. He had told his parents how scared and desperate she had been. And how important it was for him to get her to safety. I learn from his father, brought to Israel from Holland as a young child, that his own parents had been hidden from the Nazis by a couple of Dutch farmers, good Christians, who had risked their lives to save them. He tells me that Yitzhar knew deeply what it meant to be in danger. He knew what it meant to be human. And he knew the ethical legacy of his own family. Reaching out to help another human being in her

vulnerability—even in enemy territory—was fundamental to who he was. The child of settlers and an Israeli soldier descended from survivors, rescuing a Palestinian woman in the thick of battle in the wake of the biggest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. Doesn't lend itself to easy stereotyping.

Scene two: I am visiting Jish, a predominantly Christian Arab locality in the Upper Galilee. This ancient territory of Gush Halav was referenced by the Roman Jewish historian Josephus as the home of John of Gischala, and as the last city in the Galilee to fall to the Romans in the First Jewish–Roman War. We are less than 10 miles from the Lebanese border. Throughout our meeting with locals—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Druze, Circassians—sirens wail. These bright, optimistic people, brimming with life, maintain incredible poise as Hezbollah rockets made in Iran seek to kill them. In these moments, I wish there were a livestream to the entire world.

The Galilee is a place where people of every shade and variant live out the joys and vulnerabilities of life. Over lunch in the church reception hall, I ask the head of the regional council, Sharif Nijim, what had come before his entry into public life. I could never have predicted his reply: He had been a building contractor whose specialty was *mikvaot*. Yes, this Arab Israeli, from the Galilee, specialized in building and installing Jewish ritual baths throughout Israel. He proudly tells me he could spot the nuances of a Chabad mikvah with his eyes closed. Remarkable.

Scene three: It's the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul, traditionally opening day for the Haredi school system. I am going to the heart of the Haredi world to visit an independent school in an ultra-Orthodox enclave of Beit Shemesh, itself a mixed city. Tensions have been high around questions of military service for Haredim against the backdrop of the war, and I'm not entirely sure what type of reception to expect.

I arrive in the classroom and encounter a group of smiling kids and their *melamed* (teacher), with all of the external trappings that set them apart — the long *peyes*, the big kippahs. One boy stands up, with all of the gestures and gesticulations that in that world typically animate both Torah study and everyday speech. He explains how they pray every day for the hostages. And he adds: but also for the soldiers out there fighting for us. The class joins together in a full-throated rendition of the prayer for our hostages, that same prayer for Jews in captivity that has been recited by Jews for centuries: “Our brethren, the entire House of Israel, who are in distress and in captivity...”

Again, Israel. Full of surprises.



How does any of this conform with the meta-narratives told about Israelis? The suggestions we take in, almost by osmosis, are that settlers hate Palestinians; that Jews and Arabs are fundamentally enemies rather than fellow citizens; that Haredim hate the state and detest IDF soldiers; that there is too much difference between us to be able to live together; that our culture wars run deeper than our sense of connection to one another.

Reality, it turns out, is more complex than anything that might arise out of a newspaper headline, social-media post, or stereotype.

Here is a basic principle: Just as biodiversity is a fact of life on our planet, social diversity is in the architecture of being human, fundamental to the process of social evolution. It is indifferent to our rejection or embrace. It just is. In Israel, it’s also a fact—a glorious one. The valuable question isn’t whether we *should* embrace or reject diversity, since we must. It is how we can sidestep its pitfalls and learn to harness it for growth.

Can diversity complicate shared living? Yes. It can propel us into

reactivity and defensiveness. It can feed a stark polarization of society. It can drive us to viciously define “in” and “out” groups in ways that blind us to the experience of others while solidifying a conviction that only our way holds value. Israel can certainly lean toward this corrosive type of us-versus-them mentality. In this form, diversity is an absence of commonality, a dearth of threads that tie us to a shared vision. The breadth of competing ideas, especially in a context of collective existential angst, stretches the margins of our collective banner to the breaking point. Our enemies have exploited this type of polarized differences in their attempts to divide and weaken us.

But we cannot forget the complementary truth. Diversity, with all of the ways it complicates life, also supports it. It enables us to nourish and energize one another, to gain traction toward collective creativity by pushing up against what is different. It compels us to think outside the box, to imagine new and distinct possibilities. It offers richness and cultural wealth that generate a vitality that has always been at the root of Jewish culture and achievement.

Israel, the nation-state of the Jewish people, exemplifies this diversity model, too. We are a nation blessed with remarkable spiritual and creative energies, a place where cultures—within and beyond us—encounter and enrich one another. This can be a source of enormous power.

The determining factor in whether diversity—of identities and opinions alike—becomes a dangerous weakness, or the connective tissue of a thriving collective, is whether there are *actual meeting points* between our diverse parts.

This isn’t a theoretical postulation or an exercise in rhetoric. I have placed this insight at the center of my presidential vision for Israel. I came into office believing that bringing together the disparate and often ideologically divided sectors of Israeli society is not a luxury. It’s an existential imperative. I started “Time to Talk: The President’s Ini-

tiatives for a Shared Israeli Future” out of the recognition that, after so many fissures, the invisible binding narrative holding Israeli society together was beginning to fray. This concerned me long before October 7. The ruptures since leave me more convinced than ever: Nothing is more critical for our society. In order to approach the formidable work of rebuilding after tragedy, we will need to have ever-increasing points of contact, outside of our own echo chambers, to find commonality and genuine mutual respect. We will need to come to see one another as partners, not as competitors to topple or defeat, our differences notwithstanding. We will need, in short, to make diversity an asset.



The double-edged sword that is diversity is a fact not only when it comes to divisions within Israel. It also goes for Jewish communities throughout the world.

A central variable in the matrix of modern Jewish identity is the Diaspora’s relationship with the State of Israel; it’s one of the main tectonic plates of the Jewish narrative. The October 7 massacre and the ongoing war have deepened both the range of emotions and positions vis-à-vis Israel, and the measure of their intensity. While the basic assumption that the Jewish people should have a nation state of our own — Jewish, democratic, and aligned with its foundational values — remains a given for all but the most fringe elements, the nature and substance of their relationship with the State of Israel has been an evolving story. Here, too, there are those who wonder whether there are limits to what can be contained under the banner of diversity.

I want to make a radical suggestion: Zionism was and remains a structural container for Jewish diversity. The early Zionist visionaries *wanted* Zionism to be a secure metaphysical sphere that could con-

tain and support a wealth of Jewish identities and opinions. Zionism was *meant* to offer the Jewish people not only a *physical* national home and a territory, where they could defend themselves against the perils of ever-present antisemitism, but also a *spiritual* container for ideas and identities, a *conceptual* home secure enough to hold debates on the substantive content.

I believe that it is serving its function remarkably well. Zionism remains a core and defining issue for so many Jews because it continues to offer, among other things, a compelling narrative backdrop for substantive Jewish exchange, because it affirms our belonging to one another and our shared story. Plainly, it *matters* to all of us because it deserves to. Because of the veracity of its call on the Jewish soul. Even though we hold different views and definitions of it from one another. Indeed, *because* we hold different views and definitions.

And while the foundational story of the structure—the right of the Jewish people to a national home—is a basic fact of Zionism, the next stories that get added to that structure are for all of us to jointly determine.

I believe that this moment of the evolutionary stage of our peoplehood—this time of rupture and crisis—is rife with potential for growth. And I am convinced that Zionism is just the container this moment needs to enable growth. It won't happen by itself. It is up to us to actively give Zionism substance in alignment with the needs of now. To do what I've termed in the past “reclaiming Zionism.”

To do so, we will need to broaden the conversation between us. To turn that conversation into one that allows us to rediscover each of our own voices *within* it. Above all else, we will need to clear our own dense inner pathways and bring a genuine receptiveness to *hearing* one another. Even when what we hear from the other side may feel uncomfortable, distant, or difficult. It can be done.



As president of the nation-state of the Jewish people, the Jewish democratic State of Israel, a complicated country of incredible beauty and vitality, I not only believe this to be true. I have also placed this truth atop my operational agenda. “Time to Talk,” which I mentioned earlier, and “Voice of the People,” my presidential initiatives for domestic Israeli and global Jewish dialogue, respectively, are all about keeping a real and genuine conversation going. Not conversation simply as an end unto itself. Conversation as a means to actively contend with our challenges and to spark a shared and sustainable process of building and growth for the State of Israel, and for the Jewish people.

It is time we fully own the fact that we are diverse, both as a global people and as a nation-state. And it is past time to appreciate that diversity is a source of strength for us and a key to our future as a nation. ✨