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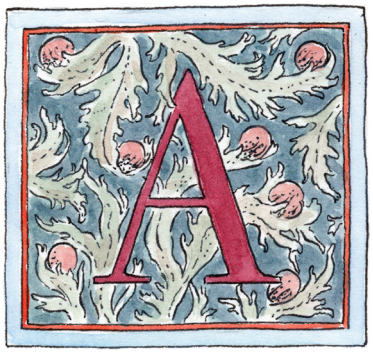
A Lesson in Resilience for America

Israel's example reminds of us of who we once were



AS I WRITE, in April 2026, a shaky cease-fire has been declared in the war with Iran. In the United States, most Americans welcome the idea of an end to the fighting: They've grown tired of a conflict they think went on too long (five and a half weeks), cost too much (the price of oil rose as high as 15 percent above its 25-year, inflation-adjusted average), entailed too many sacrifices (13 American service members lost their lives in the war), and was waged for a cause that didn't justify the trouble (defanging and perhaps deposing the regime in Tehran, a sworn enemy of 47 years).

Israelis have a different reaction to the cease-fire. Support for continuing the war remains high, despite enduring a bombardment of 650 ballistic missiles, the death of 20 civilians, and casualties in the

hundreds. Prime Minister Netanyahu has come under attack from his political *left* for falling short of the victory he had promised. In the words of opposition leader Yair Lapid, "Netanyahu reached the worst result; the regime in Iran was not defeated." And not for lack of will. "Many Israelis would be willing to endure another six weeks — and more — of sleepless nights, school-less days, and hours in our safe rooms to bring about even part of our vision of regional peace," noted Michael Oren in a recent essay. "The tens of thousands of IDF reservists who have already served hundreds of days in combat will readily serve hundreds more."

Maybe it's to be expected that Israelis, for whom the threat from Iran and its proxies is immediate and existential, should be willing to sacrifice so much for the sake of prospective security. Maybe it's to be expected, too, that Americans see the threat from Iran as distant and notional, even among those who know that Tehran is responsible for the death of hundreds of U.S. citizens. That sense of distance is surely compounded by the bitter memory of two Mideast wars that cost thousands of American lives without delivering on their promises.

But there's something deeper at work. Israelis — by necessity, circumstance, and self-selection — largely tend to be tenacious, self-disciplined, resilient people. Americans — through good fortune and a penchant for ease and convenience — tend not to be. That is a long-term threat to America's safety and well-being. We could stand to take a lesson or two on it from our Israeli friends.

It wasn't all that long ago that Americans were raised on stories of resilience in the face of adversity. Washington's army at Valley Forge. The 20th Maine Infantry at Little Round Top. Amer-

ican POWs in the Hanoi Hilton. These and other landmarks in our history testified to what Admiral John S. McCain, the late senator's father, described as a sense of "dedication which scorns vacillation and doubt." After the Marines took thousands of casualties during a botched landing at Tarawa atoll in World War II, the *New York Times* editorialized, "We must steel ourselves now to pay that price."

What was true of Americans in war was true also in peace. Depressions and recessions happened: We worked and scrimped through them. Natural disasters struck: We prayed for God's grace and endured them. When Americans heard recordings of Winston Churchill's speeches to Parliament, offering nothing but "blood, toil, tears, and sweat," it moved them to get involved in a foreign war. Our fictional heroes, in books or on screen, were tenderhearted on the inside but maintained a stoical demeanor. Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*; Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn in *The African Queen* — that was us, or at least what we aspired to be.

No longer.

Scores of books have been written about how that culture fell by the wayside. Reserve gave way to self-revelation. The old virtue of delaying gratification was replaced by the habit of demanding and getting it — immediately. Material plenty led to an expectation of physical comfort, which later morphed into a demand for emotional cossetting. The word *parent* went from noun to verb, from a role to an activity, infantilizing adults while coddling children. Safety became a legal requirement; risk-taking, a legal liability; "safetyism," a state of mind. The status of victim was valorized, and often monetized, at the expense of moral responsibility and personal agency. Ideas such as "microaggressions" and "unconscious bias" took hold; instead of trying to make our skins a little thicker, we discovered new ways to take

offense. When things went poorly, we no longer asked, self-reproachingly, "Where did we go wrong?" Instead, we looked, conspiratorially, for a culprit: "Who did this to us?" And while fierce individualism has always been a part of America's character and creed, we now have a kind of cancerous and metastatic individualism that cannot recognize occasions in national life that call for collective sacrifice.

These and other trends aren't the only things shaping American life today, and there is no shortage of opposing tendencies: of young men and women seeking challenge, not comfort; of open revolt against politically correct dogmas; of millions of Americans who have no interest in being the objects or beneficiaries of other people's pity; of millions more who have learned to live beyond themselves for the sake of other people and greater things.

Yet all that feels as if it is swimming upstream; that it belongs to a counterculture, not the dominant one. And the dominant culture inevitably has a shaping hand in political life and the policy choices that emerge from politics.

How, for instance, did we arrive at a $39 trillion national debt — nearly four times what it was (in inflation-adjusted dollars) just 30 years ago? Principally, because we have political leaders in both parties who cannot exact even modest sacrifices from the public — in terms of entitlement reform, or higher taxes, or more disciplined discretionary spending, or a genuine reinvention of government (unlike the three-month demolition derby conducted under Elon Musk last year) — for the sake of our long-term fiscal health. How, too, have we repeatedly lost or abandoned wars against militarily inferior enemies in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and now, possibly, Iran? Principally, because they have outlasted us: That is, they have made the bet that while we have the military and financial means, we lack the patience and the stomach for long and arduous fights.

These points do not go unnoticed in Tehran, which is why its remain-

ing leaders seem to be convinced that they have the upper hand in negotiations with the United States. They do not go unnoticed in Beijing, either. China may not be able to match the United States in its overall military capabilities, at least not yet. But China's leaders are confident that they have a vastly higher tolerance for suffering than their American counterparts. How many casualties are Americans prepared to take, and how much economic pain are we willing to endure, for the sake of defending Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack?

To calculate the true balance of power, one also must account for the underlying balance of will. That's one area where America's non-resilient civilization falls dangerously, perhaps fatally, short.

Now turn to Israel.

Israeli resilience is proverbial—so much so that the idea of it is sometimes resented. "No country should be expected to live indefinitely in a state of managed danger," writes Joshua Hoffman in his excellent Substack newsletter, *Future of Jewish*. "When that reality is reframed as 'resilience,' something deeply dangerous happens: The abnormal begins to be framed or at least is expected to be normal."

Hoffman is right that what Israelis must endure just to live should not be normalized to the point of being forgotten. But resilience is a virtue, however one comes by it. And it's a mistake to ascribe Israeli resilience solely to the forms of adversity that it faces. It also comes from the purposes for which the state was created in the first place.

Granted, most Israelis are toughened by the facts of their national life: conscription, service, *miluim*. They are toughened by proximity to neighbors they know who want them dead. By the wars they have fought, the friends they have lost, the children they must send to battle. By hundreds of trips to bomb shelters with family or with

strangers. By knowing they can't set foot abroad without encountering an atmosphere of latent hostility and potential violence. By the internecine sociocultural and political battles that they are constantly waging within.

But tough isn't synonymous with resilient, which is about not only strength but also elasticity — the ability to bounce back after taking a blow. Why do people bounce back? Not just because they are capable of enduring pain. It's because they have something to live for: a goal that stretches endurance, ennobles suffering, and ignites the human spirit. I once heard a story about a man who, during one of the death marches in the early weeks of 1945, carried his young son on his shoulders for miles in the bitter cold. Years later, when the child asked his father how he had found the strength to carry him under such punishing conditions, his father replied, "It was you who carried me."

Israeli resilience is born of a similar spirit. The Jewish state makes no guarantee of a safe or easy life for its people. Compared with the United States, it offers a cramped, demanding, threatened existence. But it nonetheless honors a promise: that Jews may have political sovereignty, personal freedom, democratic institutions, the opportunity to live as their own people in their ancestral land, the means to safekeep ancient and modern memory, the chance to nurture their culture, speak an almost-forgotten language, openly practice a much-persecuted faith, and steer their own destiny. In short, not just the right to be authentically their fullest selves in both their individual and collective identities but also the pride that comes from defending that right for themselves and posterity.

I write this knowing that Israel is also a country of 10 million people groggily waking up each morning, sometimes after several trips to their safe rooms, trying to figure out how to get through the day. Political life is riven and societal disagreements bitter. And after

close to three years of war, there's no good and clear end in sight.

Yet the fact remains: Israelis are prepared to fight, not only because they have enemies who mean them harm but also, and chiefly, because they believe they have something worth fighting for. That is simply not true elsewhere in the free world. A Gallup International poll from 2023 — that is, more than a year after Russia invaded Ukraine — found that only 33 percent of Britons would be willing to fight for their country, as against 50 percent who would not. In Germany, the figures were 23 percent versus 57 percent; in Austria, 20 percent versus 62 percent; in Italy, 14 percent against 78 percent. As for the United States, a plurality, 41 percent, would still fight for their country, but a whopping 34 percent would not. The rest claim not to know.

The polling data here testify to something worse than innocence about what it takes to secure a free and prosperous life against determined enemies. It speaks to the thinning out of the West's civic concepts. What, in life, is worth fighting for beyond life itself? Two or three generations ago, I don't think it would have been difficult to get a broad majority of people in democratic nations to rattle off a lengthy list: freedom at home and abroad; God and country; our way of life; our sacred honor and the national interest. Merely to mention that list today is to be struck by how fusty it all sounds, and how cynically we dismiss it. We aren't suckers for all that anymore, least of all those of us who consider ourselves sophisticated. Our preferred pronouns are "I/me," not "we/us."

Israelis aren't blessed with our conceits. And so they remain able to do things that the rest of the West, with the notable exception of Ukraine and the shaky one of the United States, no longer can: holding out, accepting risk, putting a greater good ahead of a personal one, living with constant anxiety and not-infrequent tragedy, loving their country, warts and all, and being willing to sacrifice for it in the face of daunting odds. For all this, years' worth of international survey

data consistently show that Israelis are among the happiest people on earth — not because their lives aren't hard but because they are purposeful. They know who they are, what they're about, what they're up against, and, above all, what they are for.

These are the virtues that sustain a civilization in the long term. Wouldn't it be something if America could reclaim them for itself?

Doing so would require, first, a great unlearning.

We would have to unlearn a shallow and tendentious history of the United States, much of it courtesy of the late Howard Zinn, which has taught generations of students that our country is mainly the product of theft, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation — as opposed to a country that, like others, was born in sin but that, unlike others, has consistently uplifted itself thanks to its foundational promises and has done immeasurably more good than harm for its people and the world.

We would have to unlearn the insipid belief that America is an exceptional nation only in our own minds — that, as Barack Obama once put it, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." Among other differences, neither Britain nor Greece nor any other country was founded in the declared conviction that all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights.

We would have to unlearn the cynical notion, prevalent in MAGA circles, that America has no higher interest than self-interest — that our ideals count for nothing against our material needs or commercial advantages. Among the ways America is different from other countries is that we aren't in this just for ourselves; that the

admiration we engender has something to do with our strength but has much more to do with the strength of our ideals.

Along with the unlearning would have to come a relearning.

That the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts with the idea of founding a new Jerusalem, modeled on the example of the old, central to which was the Mosaic injunction: "Choose life." That the *novus ordo seclorum* — the "new order of the ages," tied to the date 1776 — marked an unprecedented transformation in global politics: from particularism to universalism and from regimes based in hereditary privilege to those based in equality and individual rights. That the "new birth of freedom" that Lincoln spoke of at Gettysburg was won at an immense cost in lives, and that the cost was and remains worth the prize. That the abundance of American life emerges not through the coerced redistribution of preexisting wealth but because a rule of law that respects private property and profit allows creative minds to take risks and create value where it did not previously exist. That in 2026 America is still the only country that goes to the moon, and that it does so for the reasons John F. Kennedy spelled out in 1962: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because the challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win."

None of this means that Americans can afford to forget or downplay the evils of our past. It does mean that we desperately need to reacquaint ourselves with the nobility of our ideals and the heroism it took to uphold them. In doing so, we might be able to fall in love with America all over again, to know why it's worth fighting for, to recover the ability to rise above ourselves in its service.

Finally, we could stand to learn something from Israel.

That isn't much in evidence today. On the contrary, polling data show

that more Americans are souring on the Jewish state. It would be easy to read that as a bad omen for Israelis, and perhaps it is. But it would be much wiser to see it as a warning sign about us—about our diminished capacity for critical thinking and moral reasoning. How have we in the United States managed to confuse perpetrator and victim in this war? When did we lose the capacity to use the word *terrorist*? Why have we so easily fallen for the baldest and most blatantly dishonest Palestinian propaganda? Why are we so beguiled by conspiracy theories plainly rooted in antisemitism? And since when do we malign an immensely capable and brave ally that fights by our side?

Most important, how do we fail to see in Israel a model of what a democratic people, which for 78 years has been battling for survival while still managing to thrive, can be capable of achieving through self-belief and the ability to recover its strength after taking blow after blow? Americans cannot hope to regain our old resilience unless we know what resilient looks like. The sooner we learn from the Israelis, the faster we might save ourselves from what, increasingly, we risk becoming. ✳

April 19, 2026

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