

Survival, Sovereignty, and the Liberty of the Jewish People

[View PDF](#)



Salomon L. Vaz Dias was born in the Netherlands. He has functioned as assistant cantor and a sexton in Congregation Talmud Tora in Amsterdam and Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. He is a specialist in Minhagim and local customs of the Western Sephardic tradition. He also worked as Executive Director of the American Sephardi Federation, American Friends of Likud, and the World Union of General Zionists.

There is a comforting tendency in contemporary discussions of Jewish history to speak of survival almost as though survival itself constituted victory.

I cannot accept that formulation. For me, Jewish and Zionist identity is neither an abstraction nor merely a religious affiliation detachable from history. It is the inheritance of a people whose collective memory has been shaped by exile and return, persecution and creativity, political vulnerability and national renewal—and, above all, by an extraordinary determination not to disappear.

This understanding is intensely personal. Almost my entire family was murdered because they were Jews. The overwhelming majority of the Jewish community from which I come was segregated, dispossessed, deported, and exterminated during the German occupation of the Netherlands. Centuries before that catastrophe, my Sephardic ancestors left the magnificent Iberian Peninsula because remaining openly Jewish had become impossible.

These are not remote episodes in a history book. They form part of the consciousness through which I understand Jewish identity. I speak as a native

Dutchman who later became an American citizen; as a Jew by faith, culture, history, memory, and peoplehood; and politically as what has become an increasingly rare creature: an old-fashioned General Zionist.

The Lost Center of Zionism

General Zionism once occupied an important position within the Zionist movement. Historically, it described those Zionists who belonged neither to the socialist-Labor camp nor to the religious parties. Over time important elements of General Zionism became associated with European liberalism, private enterprise, a substantial middle class, constitutional government, civic responsibility, and Jewish national self-determination. That political world has largely vanished.

The old disagreements among General Zionists, Labor Zionists, Revisionists, religious Zionists, and other movements were never merely quarrels among party organizations. They reflected fundamentally different conceptions of the society Zionism ought to create once Jews again possessed political sovereignty.

What should a Jewish state be?

Was Jewish sovereignty merely intended to provide Jews with military and political power after centuries of defenselessness? Or was sovereignty supposed to create something greater: a society in which Jewish national independence existed together with liberty, constitutional restraint, human dignity, freedom of conscience, and civic responsibility?

For me, the latter was always implicit in the Zionist project. Zionism was not meant simply to exchange Jewish powerlessness for Jewish power. Its purpose was the restoration of Jewish political agency: the ability of the Jewish people to take responsibility for their own security, culture, institutions, and future.

But political agency carries obligations as well as rights. When corruption, ideological absolutism, political polarization, or irresponsible leadership weakens democratic institutions, the danger to a nation does not arise exclusively from

external enemies. A sovereign people must possess sufficient confidence to examine itself.

Jewish history teaches us what can happen when others possess unlimited power over Jews. Jewish sovereignty should also teach us why unlimited power is dangerous in anyone's hands. Survival Is Not Victory

The Jewish people survived Babylonian conquest and exile.

We survived Rome. We survived expulsions, forced conversions, massacres, ghettos, inquisitions, pogroms, and centuries in which Jewish existence often depended upon the goodwill of rulers whose protection could vanish overnight.

Then came the destruction of European Jewry. Six million Jews were murdered. Ancient communities disappeared. Families vanished. Languages, schools, synagogues, libraries, traditions, institutions, and entire Jewish civilizations were destroyed.

Three years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the State of Israel proclaimed its independence. That restoration of Jewish sovereignty was among the most consequential events in modern Jewish history.

But sovereignty does not retroactively transform catastrophe into victory. The murdered did not "win" because descendants or survivors lived to establish a state.

That distinction matters. Survival means that the murderers failed to extinguish the Jewish people. It means that after destruction someone remained to say Kaddish.

Someone remained to teach a child the Shema. Someone reopened a synagogue. Someone wrote Hebrew poetry. Someone argued about Jewish politics. Someone built another Jewish home. Someone raised the flag of a sovereign Jewish state. That is an extraordinary historical achievement.

But it came at an almost incomprehensible human cost. Our great achievement is therefore not that history could not wound us.

History wounded us terribly.

Our achievement is that it could not erase us. Empires that ruled us disappeared. Governments that expelled us fell. Movements that sought to convert us failed. Regimes that attempted to annihilate us were eventually consigned to history.

And still there are Jews. Still Hebrew is spoken. Still Torah is studied. Still our melodies are sung.

Still Jewish children are born. Still Jerusalem occupies its incomparable place in Jewish and civilized consciousness.

And today there exists a sovereign State of Israel in which Jews possess something denied to generations before us: the political capacity to participate directly in determining their national future.

That is not triumphalism. It is continuity.

The Dutch Lesson: Liberty of Conscience

Yet there is another element of my identity that is equally important to understanding my Zionism. I remain profoundly Dutch.

When I think about political liberty, I think not only about Herzl, Pinsker, Jabotinsky, Weizmann, Ben-Gurion, or the Zionist Congresses. I also think of William the Silent and of the long, imperfect struggle in the Netherlands against religious coercion.

The Pacification of Ghent of 1576 arose from the revolt against Spanish authority and included an end to religious persecution as part of an effort to reunite deeply divided provinces. It did not create modern religious liberty, and its compromises quickly proved fragile. Nevertheless, it formed part of William of Orange's effort to achieve a measure of religious peace in a society torn apart by confessional conflict.

The Union of Utrecht of 1579 went further in establishing what became one of the foundational political arrangements of the northern Netherlands. It expressly provided that no person should be persecuted on account of religion, even while the individual provinces retained considerable authority over public worship. It was therefore not yet the American First Amendment, nor was it a modern separation of church and state. But it helped establish a principle of immense historical significance: the state should not hunt a person into the privacy of his conscience.

That distinction matters. The early Dutch Republic did not abolish religious privilege. Public worship was regulated, religious minorities remained subject to restrictions, and full civic equality was far from complete. Yet something revolutionary had begun.

The violent principle that political authority must impose a single religious truth upon every citizen gradually yielded to a more pragmatic conception of society: people of different convictions could inhabit the same political community without requiring one another's theological submission.

For European civilization, this was no small achievement. It created space in which Jews, Protestants of different denominations, Catholics, freethinkers, merchants, scholars, refugees, and dissenters could coexist—sometimes uneasily, often imperfectly, but with a degree of freedom extraordinary for its time. That environment mattered enormously to Sephardic Jews. It helped make my home city Amsterdam one of the great centers of Jewish intellectual, commercial, and religious life. The lesson was profound: A state becomes stronger, not weaker, when it ceases attempting to govern the human conscience.

Zionism and Constitutional Liberty

This brings me to an unresolved question at the heart of the Zionist enterprise.

The Zionist movement created institutions, mobilized Jewish communities across continents, promoted settlement, developed political diplomacy, fostered Hebrew culture, and laid much of the organizational groundwork from which Jewish sovereignty emerged. The World Zionist Organization itself was founded at the First Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897, with the goal of securing a recognized Jewish home in Eretz Yisrael.

Yet when Israel achieved independence in 1948, the new state did not ultimately adopt the comprehensive written constitution originally contemplated by its founders.

Israel today possesses Basic Laws based upon Ottoman and British jurisprudence rather than a single codified constitutional document. The Knesset itself acknowledges that the state has no comprehensive constitution and that disputes about Israel's identity as both Jewish and democratic have contributed to the

continuing constitutional debate. That unfinished constitutional project should concern Zionists.

The Declaration of Independence spoke in unmistakably liberal terms. It envisioned a state founded upon freedom, justice, and peace, and promised equality of social and political rights irrespective of religion, race, or sex, together with freedom of religion and conscience. Those principles were not foreign decorations attached to Zionism.

They belong at its center.

Indeed, the World Zionist Organization's own current constitution describes Zionism as adhering to justice, equality, and democracy and as rejecting discrimination on grounds including origin, nationality, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The question, therefore, is not whether liberty is somehow incompatible with Zionism. The more difficult question is whether Zionist institutions and the State of Israel are sufficiently determined to defend liberty when doing so becomes politically inconvenient.

Freedom of Speech Is Not a Luxury

Freedom of speech is especially important in a society whose citizens carry radically different memories, religious convictions, political philosophies, and understandings of national identity.

A free society does not protect speech because every opinion is wise. It protects speech because no government, political faction, religious establishment, or ideological movement can safely be entrusted with determining which opinions may be expressed.

Zionism itself could hardly have developed without intellectual dissent. Herzl challenged accepted assumptions about Jewish emancipation. Ahad Ha'am challenged political Zionism. Religious Zionists challenged secular Zionists. Revisionists challenged Labor. General Zionists challenged both socialist collectivism and religious political authority.

Israeli democracy has always contained arguments of extraordinary intensity precisely because Jewish sovereignty returned political disagreement to the Jewish people. That disagreement is not evidence of national weakness. Properly protected, it is evidence of political maturity.

The moment criticism of government becomes confused with treason, or disagreement with religious authority becomes confused with hostility to Judaism, liberty is already in danger.

Freedom of Religion Means Freedom From Religious Coercion The same principle applies to religion.

A Jewish state has every right to express Jewish history, Hebrew civilization, the Jewish calendar, Jewish national memory, and the relationship of the Jewish people to Eretz Yisrael. But the Jewish character of a state cannot depend upon compelling belief. Faith imposed through political power ceases to be faith and becomes coercion.

Freedom of religion necessarily includes several liberties simultaneously: the freedom to believe, the freedom to practice, the freedom to change one's degree of observance, the freedom to belong to a different religious tradition, and the freedom not to believe at all. Those liberties protect religious Jews as much as secular Jews. They protect the Orthodox Jew from a hostile secular majority. They protect the secular Jew from rabbinic coercion.

They protect Sephardim whose religious traditions differ from Ashkenazi establishments. They protect Reform and Conservative Jews. They protect Christians, Muslims, Druze, Bahá'ís, and others. And they protect the individual human conscience.

A government powerful enough to impose somebody else's religion upon you today is powerful enough to suppress your religion tomorrow.

Jewish history should make us particularly sensitive to that danger.

The Seduction of Religious Extremism

Religious extremism becomes dangerous when theological certainty acquires political power.

This danger is not unique to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

It is a danger inherent whenever human beings become convinced that disagreement with them constitutes rebellion against God.

Once political opponents cease being fellow citizens and become heretics, traitors, infidels, apostates, or enemies of divine purpose, ordinary democratic compromise becomes morally suspect.

From there, persecution becomes dangerously easy to justify.

Jewish civilization knows the consequences of such thinking because Jews have repeatedly been its victims.

We therefore carry a particular responsibility not to reproduce the logic that persecuted us. No rabbi, priest, imam, minister, politician, or ideological movement should possess authority over another person's conscience. No government should determine which interpretation of God every citizen must accept. And no political majority should imagine that electoral victory gives it ownership over the spiritual life of minorities.

The Jewish State Must Not Fear Liberty

Some believe that more religious coercion makes Israel more Jewish.

I believe Jewish history suggests precisely the opposite question should be asked: What kind of Jewish society requires coercion to remain Jewish?

A civilization confident in itself does not fear freedom. Judaism survived Babylon, Rome, Christendom, Islam, the Inquisition, emancipation, secularism, communism, fascism, assimilation, and modernity. It does not require a policeman standing behind the synagogue door. Nor should secular Israelis fear Judaism.

The Bible, rabbinic civilization, Sephardic philosophy, Jewish law, Hebrew language, liturgy, poetry, historical memory, and the experience of exile constitute a civilizational inheritance vastly larger than any contemporary political party or religious institution.

A genuinely Jewish and democratic state ought therefore to protect both Jewish civilization and personal liberty. The two need not be enemies.

From Survival to Responsibility

The Jewish people have accomplished something remarkable.

We survived.

But after 1948, survival alone could no longer be the complete Zionist program.

A sovereign people must ask not merely whether its state exists, but what kind of state it wishes to become.

That is the transition from survival to responsibility.

Jewish history imposes upon us an obligation to defend Jews against persecution.

But that same history ought to make us defenders of the persecuted.

Jewish history teaches us the danger of statelessness.

But it should also teach us the danger of unrestricted state power.

Jewish history teaches us to cherish our religion.

But it should therefore also teach us that religion is most precious when freely embraced rather than politically imposed.

And Jewish history teaches us the value of having a national voice.

It should therefore make us reluctant to silence the voices of others.

The Netherlands of William the Silent did not instantly create modern liberal democracy. Neither did the American Revolution, the French Revolution, or any other historical transformation produce perfect liberty overnight.

Political liberty developed slowly, through struggle, contradiction, compromise, and repeated correction.

Israel's constitutional journey remains similarly unfinished.

Perhaps that unfinished work constitutes one of the most important Zionist tasks of our generation.

We must preserve the Jewish state.

But we must also preserve the kind of liberty that makes a Jewish state worth preserving.

We must defend Israel against those who seek its destruction.

But we must equally defend its democratic institutions against those—whether religious or secular, right or left—who would subordinate individual conscience to ideological power.

And we must remember that Jewish sovereignty was not restored merely so that Jews could survive behind stronger walls.

It was restored so that after centuries of living at the mercy of others, the Jewish people could build a society worthy of its history.

Am Yisrael does not exist because history was kind to us.

We exist because generation after generation Jews chose to remain Jews.

The challenge of sovereignty is greater still:

to remain Jewish without becoming intolerant;

to remain strong without worshipping power;

to remain faithful without coercing faith;

to remain national without denying human dignity;

and to defend the State of Israel without surrendering the freedoms that give democratic sovereignty its moral meaning.

Survival brought us here.

Liberty, responsibility, and constitutional restraint must help determine what we become.

I also changed the historical formulation about the Dutch Republic slightly. The Pacification of Ghent and Union of Utrecht were major milestones toward liberty

of conscience, but not modern church-state separation; Article 13 of the Union allowed considerable provincial control over public religious practice while establishing that individuals should not be persecuted for their religion. That nuance actually strengthens your comparison with Israel because it shows constitutional liberty developing gradually rather than appearing fully formed.

Let me finish with the motto of my native country:

Je maintiendrai!

(I shall maintain)