Thoughts on the Future of the Jewish People

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"In a world where everything *is seen, nothing is known.*
In a world where everything is known, nothing is understood."
— Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

Living in Israel in an era that surely lays claim to bringing us closer to redemption than previous generations could have imagined, I see the glass as very much more than half full. Yet the upper part remains to be filled, and there are many issues to be faced—some propitious, some daunting—before it will overflow.

Very nearly half of the world's Jews now live in Israel. With the recent increasing interest in *aliyah*, it is likely that Israel will soon become home to the majority. This has some implications in halakha, specifically regarding laws relating to the Land of Israel, such as *yovel* and *shemittah*. These laws will revert from their lesser status as rabbinic obligations (*de-rabbanan*) and, "as in days of old," they will once again take on the character of biblical obligations (*de-oraita*).

Beyond the halakhic changes that the next decade may bring, we will increasingly see Israel as the powerhouse of Jewish life. That is not to say that Jewish life in the diaspora will wither away. But with the dwindling numbers of grassroots adherents of the Conservative and Reform movements, national Jewish institutions will more often be led by members of the Modern Orthodox community. On the other hand, the Haredi world, as it continues to grow in numbers, is likely to stubbornly persist in isolating itself from Jewish issues outside of its own enclaves and will steadfastly focus its attention and resources only on its own educational systems and communal structures.

The pervasive and unabated anti-Semitism in the diaspora, combined with the relentless attacks on Israel, have already motivated many unaffiliated Jews to search for more spiritual meaning in their Judaism, and this is gradually leading increasing numbers to embrace more observances and to seek more knowledge. As it is, the amount of Torah being learned today far eclipses any other time in history. With online programs already connecting hundreds of thousands to the study of Jewish

sources, the opportunities for Torah learning on every level will become even more extensive with the still uncharted capabilities of artificial intelligence.

It is exceedingly worrisome that a recent survey found that as many as 32 percent of Jewish Americans aged 18 to 34 call themselves anti-Zionists or non-Zionists. Given that, it's unclear how connected they will remain to their Jewish heritage. Sadly, these young people—together with their descendants, and together with those who intermarry or who are raised with no Jewish content in their lives—may well be lost to the future of the Jewish nation.

In Israel, the schisms that plague society will regrettably grow in intensity. As the Haredi sector defiantly pursues its intransigence and refuses to play its part in the growth and defense of the nation, the patience of Israel's secular citizens will inevitably run out. While it will probably be short of actual civil war, the conflict is likely to become increasingly ugly and confrontational, with the government, as now, unwilling or unable to exert control.

Yehoram Gaon's poignant promise in song following the 1973 Yom Kippur War that "this will be the last war" is unlikely, unfortunately, ever to become true. Israel's enemies plot and attack it at every opportunity because of an unwavering religious belief that one day they will be able to destroy it. They can fight and lose a hundred wars, they say, while Israel cannot afford to lose even one.

With all this, Israelis consistently rank in the top five or ten on the UN World Happiness Report. This is often attributed to their strong social cohesion and sense of purpose, and there is no reason to think that this will change in the coming years or decades. Despite the too-frequent runs to the bomb shelters, despite the huge disruptions in family life and income due to the extended periods spent in the army, despite the tumultuous way in which the nation is governed, Israelis are proud of their country and will assuredly continue to walk around with their heads high and their spirits even higher.

With all of its existential challenges, or perhaps because of them, Israel's extraordinary success as a world leader in innovative technology will continue undiminished. The abundant income generated by the nation's multitudinous start-ups will go on helping to underwrite the costs of Israel's infrastructure and innumerable other construction projects, and indeed its wars. Transferring ownership of these assets out of Israel by means of "exits" is not ideal and presents a challenge to the country's long-term economic stability, but the Israeli genius will not be suppressed and will continue to attract the attention and investment of other countries and multinational conglomerates.

The disparity among Israel's various subcultures will increasingly blur as marriages between Ashkenazic and Sephardic families proliferate. One might hope that this would lead to the merging of *minhagim* into one modern Israeli set of religious customs and practices, but the religious establishment is unlikely to brook any formalized change. Similarly, a logical consequence of Israel's astounding, God-given rebirth as a nation would be a creative rethinking of parts of the *siddur* to reflect the enormous theological implications of this new status. Again, the religious authorities will not even contemplate any such notion. Yet there are pockets of creative thinkers among the grassroots whose influence may slowly spread.

As we cross the threshold where the majority of our people once again live in our ancestral land, the Jewish story is moving from being only about survival in often hostile foreign countries to being about how to manage our sovereignty. At the same time, we will continue to see the evolution from a rabbinically-led existence to the newly-minted biblical reality. This will inevitably contribute to the already growing gap between Israeli Jews and those in the diaspora. Yet Israel will never abandon its efforts to bolster Jewish communities in other lands as best it can.

The road ahead, both in Israel and in the diaspora, is full of hurdles due to the threats from external enemies on the one hand, and the stubbornness of established institutions and religious extremists on the other. Yet it is precisely within these tensions that the next chapter of Jewish history is being written—not in the margins of other nations, but at the center of our own.