

Letter from Jerusalem

Triage for Founding Values

After 64 years of statehood, has the time come for Israel to take a hard look at its sacred cows, values formed in the early pioneering days, and retool them for the future?

By **Gershon Gorenberg**

A few months after Avihai Ronski retired as the chief rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces in 2010, the media reported that he was moving temporarily to a village founded several years before 20 miles south of Beersheba in the Negev. 🇮🇱 The news value was that Ronski was moving, at least temporarily, from controversy to consensus: For years he had been a prominent resident of Itamar, a West Bank settlement known as a bastion of

the far right. In his role as the military's top rabbi, he came under criticism for allegedly politicizing the Army rabbinate.

But developing the Negev is a mom-and-apple-pie value in Israel, respected all the more because few people act on it. Moving to an isolated community expressed the Zionist ideal of pioneering—while avoiding the political tempest over West Bank settlement. If Ronski had also become a farmer, he would have completed a trifecta of old-time values.

And yet, maybe the ideals behind Ronski's move should also stir debate. Does it make more sense in 21st-century Israel, starved for open space, to start new communities anywhere, or should we be building denser and higher? Should developing the Negev still be seen as a Zionist obligation or, as some environmentalists assert, as an ecological disaster? For that matter, what about making the desert bloom or even farming in general: Do Jews need to be farmers when Israel lives on its software successes?

WHILE WE ARE QUESTIONING HALLOWED IDEALS, what about encouraging immigration to an arguably overcrowded country? Or the universal military draft? On the other hand, if you start asking if a society's basic values are obsolescent, where do you stop? What differentiates making the desert bloom from the Israeli declaration of independence's promise of "complete equality of social and political rights...irrespective of religion, race or sex"?



Changes From developing the Negev (then, above) to preserving it today.

The question of whether ideals have an expiration date is raised most cogently by scientist Jared Diamond in his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Penguin). "The values to which people cling most stubbornly under inappropriate conditions," Diamond writes, "are those values that were previously the source of their greatest triumphs over adversity." A value that once built a society can later have harmful, even catastrophic, impact if people "cling" to it in new circumstances.

Among Diamond's examples: Montana farmers once succeeded in coping with a harsh environment through rugged individualism, but sticking to that value today feeds opposition to cooperation and the government involvement needed to cope with pressing environmental threats.

The Diamond thesis does not lead to simple, automat-

ic conclusions about old Zionist values. But it does help articulate excellent questions. Start with two intertwined ideals from pre-independence days: farming and spreading out from the cities to settle the land. The rationale for making farming a fundamental value was that Jews needed not only to return to their homeland but to the soil itself. As one writer put it, “The whole Jewish people was an invalid” in the urbanized diaspora and would be restored to “national health” through working the land.

Agriculture was basic to the new Jewish economy and was a way to stake a claim to more territory for the Jewish state-to-be. After 1937, when the British Peel Commission proposed partitioning Palestine between Jews and Arabs, leaders of the Yishuv concluded that future borders would be based on where Jews had settled. Placing new kibbutzim on the Lebanese border or in the Negev was a way to ensure that as much of the land as possible ended up in the Jewish state. After independence, government planners adopted a similar strategy for cementing Israel’s hold on its territory. New towns—from Kiryat Shemona in the north to Eilat in the south—would spread the population. The government backed the expansion of agriculture with projects to provide subsidized water to farmers. Founding Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion contributed his personal vision of massive settlement of the Negev.

FAST FORWARD TO 2012: THE ATTEMPT TO MAKE JEWS into a rural people has proven to be “a short episode,” says David Newman, a geographer and dean of the faculty of humanities and social sciences at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beersheba. The country’s contemporary achievement is being able to match “the United States in high-tech and pharmaceutical development,” Newman asserts.

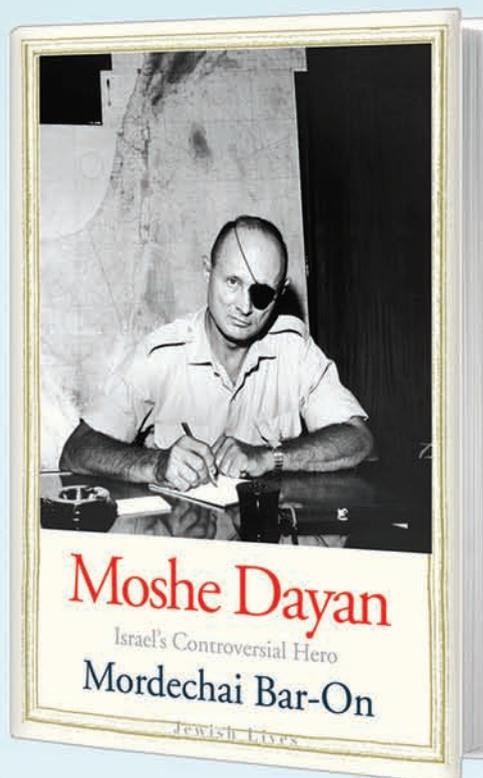
Meanwhile, with a population of 7.7 million people, nine times larger than in 1948, Israel has a dwindling supply of open space. Climate change has made the inland parts of the country warmer and drier, says ecologist Hendrik Bruins. After years of depleting its water supplies, he notes, the country is now restoring the balance through desalination.

This doesn’t mean Israel should give up farming. In fact, Bruins argues that it makes sense to produce grain to avoid total dependence on foreign supplies—and notes that grain requires much less water than Israel’s emblematic citrus crops. If anything, more needs to be done to protect farmland as open space between cities. But perhaps the classic slogan of “developing the Negev” should be rethought as “preserving the Negev.”

The impact of population growth on the environment, some would argue, is also a reason to apply the Diamond

NEW IN THE JEWISH LIVES SERIES

An intimate view of one of Israel’s
most complex and fascinating figures.



“Well-written
and absorbing.”

— Itamar Rabinovich,
former Israeli ambassador to the U.S.



Go to JewishLives.org to discover
more about Jewish lives in this
remarkable series of interpretive biography.

Current titles include Robert Gottlieb on Sarah Bernhardt,
Vivian Gornick on Emma Goldman and Mark Kurlansky on
Hank Greenberg. Forthcoming titles include Rachel Cohen on
Bernard Berenson, Yehuda Mirsky on Rav Kook, and
Saul Friedlander on Franz Kafka.

Yale UNIVERSITY PRESS

[facebook.com/JewishLives](https://www.facebook.com/JewishLives)

Available wherever books and ebooks are sold

test to another value that has been even more basic to Zionism: encouraging immigration.

Before independence, convincing Jews to move to their homeland was the condition for turning Zionism from idea to reality. Immigration expanded Jewish society and built the foundation for a state. As European persecution of Jews increased, the Zionist demand for open immigration to Pales-

For most Israeli Jews, I suspect, immigration has less emotional resonance than another time-honored value: universal military service. Conscription has been the basis for military triumphs since the War of Independence. What could be called *unselective* service—drafting nearly everyone—also expresses a deep commitment to the obligation of citizens to contribute equally to the common

Perhaps Israel, one of the world's most densely populated countries, should no longer be encouraging aliya.

tine was a plea for safe refuge. To use Diamond's words again, immigration was essential to Zionism's "greatest triumph": Israel's independence. Afterward, it was needed to continue building the state. The government airlifted Jews to their homeland when necessary and provided financial help after arrival.

Let us take as a given that Jews continue to have the right to come to Israel if they want to, and that Israel should aid those Jews facing persecution. But should Israel necessarily encourage diaspora Jews to make the choice of aliya?

"Israel does not have room to grow anymore," says Alon Tal, cochair of Israel's Green Movement. Already, Israel is one of the world's most densely populated countries. Shortages of housing, classrooms and hospital beds point to the inability to keep up with population growth, Tal argues. He aims his sharpest criticism at policies that promote large families, but also questions public relations efforts and incentives aimed at recruiting immigrants.

Before dismissing this as heresy, it is worth asking whether aliya is necessary to build a state that's already quite built up—especially when the vast majority of diaspora Jews enjoy equality in Western countries.

good. Those exempted from military service, particularly the ultra-Orthodox men who receive deferments so they can study Torah, provoke widespread resentment.

In the 1980s, Israel was drafting over 90 percent of eligible men, and most women. By the mid-1990s, a shift began. Children of the post-Yom Kippur War baby boom reached draft age just as mass aliya from the former Soviet Union brought more recruits. The IDF developed a surplus of non-combat soldiers. But no politician dared question universal service.

So in office jobs, underemployment set in. Stuart Cohen, a Bar-Ilan University expert on the military, notes that at the Azrieli mall, next to the IDF's headquarters in Tel Aviv, it is easy to spot bored soldiers "wandering around in the middle of the day." The IDF began releasing soldiers who didn't fit in rather than trying to reassign them. Up to 15 percent of those drafted get early discharges, Cohen estimates.

Meanwhile, political and legal pressure to draft the ultra-Orthodox keeps rising. The Supreme Court recently overturned the law on yeshiva deferments. In programs to draft the ultra-Orthodox, the Army has allowed them to serve in separate units that cater to

their religious requirements. But those requirements contradict another value that the Army has sought to apply: equality for women, expressed by opening up ever more military tasks to female soldiers. When I visited the base of the ultra-Orthodox infantry unit Netzah Yehuda, I learned that no women serve there at all.

If imposing equal obligations on the ultra-Orthodox requires restricting equal opportunity for women, which form of equality should take precedence?

Some writers have proposed an alternative: All young Israelis would be required to spend two or three years in national service, but only some would perform that service in the IDF. But would the individual decide whether to make her service military, or would the Army get first choice? If working in a hospital or a school is an option for able-bodied men, will motivation to serve in combat units fall?

THERE ARE NO EASY ANSWERS. Some Israeli ideals were means to goals that we have already reached. Some might need to be left in the past, or at least redefined. Others ideals—like equality, or the right of Jews to live in a Jewish state—are really values that define the society. The Diamond thesis is not a prescription for policy. It is a challenge, particularly to leaders: Praising old ideals, even acting on them, is not necessarily leadership.

Creating policy for 21st-century Israel requires asking which values should be honored in history books, and which should still guide us. Clinging to old ideals could cause ecological or social damage. Challenging them cracks consensus and causes controversy. But who said consensus was a Jewish value? **H**

Gershon Gorenberg's new book is The Unmaking of Israel (Harper).