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PALESTINE-ISRAEL

THE MYTH OF ISRAEL'S INSECURITY

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PREFACE

The series *Conflicts in Context: Palestine-Israel* aims to give readers unfamiliar with aspects of the current situation in the area background knowledge that will help them to think more clearly about the issues involved. For the most part, this series aims to offer mainly documentary evidence, citing both primary and modern secondary historical sources. The present study by Ira Chernus is a slight exception to the series' methods. Primarily, this is because it is more analytical than descriptive in its approach to the subject— Chernus' writing would be more at home in a context of *mentalité* history than sitting on a shelf with books of descriptive historical detail.

Nevertheless, we asked Ira to contribute this piece, which utilizes and expands on his recent writings on this subject, because we knew that the topic was extremely prominent in current debates about the rationales for violence in the area of Palestine-Israel, and we thought that analysis of the mindset of Israel had a direct bearing upon policy decisions and developments affecting the conflict.

Original sources are cited in a brief "Supporting Bibliography" section at the end of the essay, and notes with citations follow. We hope this will be sufficient to lead the reader back to some of the data and collected evidence behind the analysis.

The Myth of Israel's Insecurity

Ira Chernus

INTRODUCTION

There is growing pressure on Israel, from around the world, to stop expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank, end its military occupation of the West Bank, and ease its tight grip on the Gaza Strip. Palestinian leaders are nearly unanimous in saying that these steps would quickly pave the way to a lasting peace between Israel and an independent state of Palestine. Yet the Israeli government has not been willing to take these steps.

Israeli leaders justify their policies with a wide variety of statements, all based on one fundamental claim: Israel cannot afford to make any compromises or take any risks because its very existence is constantly threatened by enemies who surround it and want to destroy it. This claim is taken for granted by a majority of Jews in Israel.

It is also widely echoed in the United States, the one nation whose support is crucial for allowing Israel to continue its current policies. Even when U.S. government officials and mass media voices criticize specific Israeli actions, they typically frame that critique with words of support for Israel's existence and its right to defend itself. Thus they reinforce the myth of Israel's insecurity -- the myth that Israel is and must always be on its guard to defend its very existence.

To call this view a myth is not to say that it is utterly false. I use the word *myth* here in the sense that I learned when I was trained as an historian of religions: A myth is a narrative, blending empirical truth with imaginative

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fantasy, which expresses something fundamental about the worldview and the values of the people who tell it -- what they assume about how the world is and how people should and do live in it. The people who tell a myth do not judge it by whether it can be proven factually true. Rather, it shapes their view of truth. It tells them what they can accept as factually true and what they must consider false. It tells them how to put the facts together to form their picture of reality.[i]

The Israeli government and those who support its policies constantly offer facts to support their claim that those policies are necessary to protect Israel's existence. Some of these facts, taken in isolation, are more or less accurate. But when all the facts are added up together, the sum does offer any rational support for Israel's policies. If Israel's leaders acted upon the total fact pattern, they would pursue a far different course than they do now—a course of conciliation that could lead toward peace and security for all parties to the conflict. Israeli leaders do not move toward conciliation and peace because they and their supporters organize all the facts in a pattern that consistently supports the myth of insecurity; they selectively choose, interpret, and often misinterpret the facts to fit the myth.

Israel's leaders use the myth of insecurity to justify policies and actions that close off opportunities for peace and perpetuate the conflict.[ii] Thus their policies perpetuate an understandable hostility from governments and the public in neighboring countries. The degree of hostility has often varied in direct proportion to changes in Israeli policies, as they have varied over the decades between relatively more or less aggressive. However the myth of insecurity claims that all Israeli policies are merely defenses against some irrational hostility of its neighbors. So it effectively masks the ways in which Israel's policy and actions are themselves the chief cause of an actually quite rational hostility.

As long as the myth shapes Israeli policy and the dominant American view of Israeli policy, the Israeli government will not make the policy

changes necessary for peace. It will be afraid to make those changes because it will see every change as dangerous. That perception of danger will outweigh any benefit that peace might seem to offer. The premise that Israel is constantly threatened, which is such a crucial factor in blocking progress toward Middle East peace, thus perpetuates insecurity both for Israelis and -- to a much, much greater degree -- for Israel's neighbors, especially the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza.

Many commentators have pointed out this irony -- especially Jewish commentators both in Israel and in the United States, where the Jewish community is far more open to critical views of Israel than it was just a few years ago.[iii] Yet the myth and the policies it spawns are still embraced by a growing number of Jews in Israel and by a highly vocal and influential portion of Jews in the U.S.

None of this is anything new. The same pattern has been evident since the State of Israel was created in 1948. Its roots go back to the beginning of the Zionist movement. However it has received relatively little careful study. And few have noted that the pattern holds such a tight grip on Israeli policy because it is expressed in a mythic narrative, whose emotional power often trumps any logical analysis of facts. To put this issue in both historical and mythic perspective, I offer here a broad sketch of the history of the myth of Israel's insecurity.

This history aims to explain at a deeper level how and why Israel's policies have been so self-defeating, preventing Israel from pursuing genuine security. To explain is not to justify. Having been a vocal Jewish critic of those policies for nearly four decades, I have no interest in exonerating or excusing Israel's polices, nor those who support its policies. My interest is rather two-fold:

For readers who have accepted Israel's claim that it is indeed insecure, I aim to persuade them that this claim is rooted much more in myth

than in fact. I hope this will lead those readers to reassess whatever support they give to Israel's policies.

For readers who already oppose Israel's policies, I aim to provide another useful tool to persuade others to join them in their opposition. The growing campaign to change Israel's policies—and American support for those policies—can be strategically smarter, and thus more successful, if it understands more fully the nature of the political forces it must overcome. In this case, as so often, the study of history can be an effective way to challenge and eventually transform the myths by which people live and by which governments shape their policies.

I. The Zionist Myth of Insecurity

From a Jewish perspective, the earliest roots of the Israel-Palestine go back to the mid-19th century, far away from the Middle East, in Russia and other lands of Eastern Europe. There some number of Jews looked westward and saw Jews in Germany and other Western European lands beginning to enjoy legal and social equality with their gentile neighbors. The Eastern European Jews hoped that the wave of modernization moving eastward would bring them the same equality. They were prepared to pay the same price their fellow Jews in the West had paid: giving up traditional Jewish beliefs and practices (what's now called Orthodox Judaism) as a relic of the medieval past, which they associated with Jewish oppression and weakness.

These modernizing, secularizing Jews in Eastern Europe saw their hopes dashed in 1881, when a wave of Pan-Slavism—nationalism and chauvinism, accompanied by anti-semitism—swept across Russia and other eastern European lands. This crushed the hopes of Jews who believed that their gentile neighbors would adopt the modern Western idea of tolerance and accept Jews as equals. Some Jews left Russia. Some became revolutionaries.

But a small number took a different approach, articulated most famously in Leo Pinsker's pamphlet "Self-Emancipation," published in 1882. Pinsker argued that as long as Jews lived as a minority in diaspora, they would always be "hated rivals" and victims of anti-semitism, no matter where they lived and no matter what they did. Pinsker told the Jews: "You are *foolish* because you stand awkwardly by and expect of human nature something which it has always lacked—humanity. You are contemptible, because you have no real self-love and no national self-respect."[iv] The Jews would continue to hate themselves and embrace their own degradation, he wrote, as long as they remained as a minority living in exile. Only when the Jews became normal, "a nation like the others," would they find self-respect and "rise manfully to [their] full height."[v]

Theodore Herzl, who led the creation of a Zionist political organization, saw things much the same way. His Israeli biographer, Amos Elon, wrote that Herzl, a famous newspaper columnist, was motivated above all by "wounded pride"—being denied what he thought was his rightful place among the elite of European society simply because he was Jewish.[vi] Like virtually all the early Zionists, Herzl had no attachment to Jewish religious tradition. He was well aware that he was making national pride the sacred center of Jewish identity. So he urged the early Zionists to "turn the Jewish question into a question of Zion."[vii]

Pinsker's and Herzl's views laid an enduring foundation for Zionism. For most Zionists, security was always more than a geopolitical and military category. It was a psychological and even moral concept. Zionist theory held that, everywhere in the world, Jews would be threatened by the fatal combination of anti-semitism and self-doubt. Jews had learned from centuries of oppression to feel vulnerable, inadequate, and incapable of standing up for themselves, the Zionists said. Therefore they would feel insecure and powerless before the gentile onslaught. But it is shameful and contemptible to let oneself fall victim to inhumane persecution. Since

gentiles would always be inhumane persecutors, Jews would always feel inferiority, shame, and self-contempt as long as live in Diaspora, ruled by gentiles.

There was only one remedy, Zionists argued: a nation of their own, a Jewish state. As they looked at Western Europe, they saw modern political nationalism becoming the norm. The Greeks had won their independence from the Turkish empire. Germany and Italy were unifying. Every normal ethnic group, it seemed, had its own political state. Only nationhood would make the Jews normal, giving them the psychological security that comes from self-respect and leads to geopolitical security. This "normalization" was their guiding ideal. By making themselves a normal nation, like all the other nations, they expected to earn the world's respect and be treated as equals in the family of nations.

Unfortunately it did not work out that way, because there were fatal flaws in the theory of "normalization." Any normal nation in late 19th century Europe viewed its history as a seemingly endless conflict between "us" (and "our" allies) and "them," the real or potential enemies. A normal nation assumed that it would always have to be militarily prepared to defend itself against its foes. Being afraid of enemies was a part of being a normal nation.

So the earliest Zionists who left Eastern Europe to settle in the Turkish colony of Palestine were stuck in an impossible contradiction. Most of them assumed that gentiles would always harbor an irrational, implacable hatred of Jews, a hatred that the Jews had done nothing to create. So Jews could do nothing to remove or reduce it. Jews could only escape the gentiles to create their own normal nation. In order to be normal, though, they would have to assume that, once they created their own nation in Palestine, they would still have enemies who hated them. Thus the early Zionist settlers brought with them a deep sense of vulnerability, a conviction that they were passive victims of historical forces beyond their control.

Even if they hoped that some day things would change, they were still trapped in a catch-22. In order to feel normal and secure they had to be free of anti-Semitic persecution. So their test of the success of Zionism was how well the Jewish state was received by the gentile world. Even if they broke free of the political grip of the gentiles, they would always be watching over their shoulders to see how the gentiles were viewing them. Thus they could never escape the sense that their self-worth depended on the judgment of others. Even if they got political freedom, they could never break from the feeling that they were passive victims of the gentiles in a social-psychological way.

What's more, they did not have a very clear vision of the intermediate steps in their political progress. Their dominant ideology suggested that they could would not have the power to shape their own fate until they had achieved the goal of statehood. Until then, they would feel like passive victims.

In fact, from the very beginning, Zionists were agents of historical change. They did whatever they could to achieve their ends by political, economic, and sometimes violent means: they bought land, built farms and villages, created political structures, and negotiated with the Palestinian Arabs about all sorts of things. The negotiations sometimes led to relatively amicable relations between Zionists and Palestinian Arabs.

Sometimes though, inevitably, there was conflict. Sometimes parties on both sides resorted to violence to get their way, which intensified the conflict. A few Zionists saw that the Palestinians were responding to specific policies that the Zionist movement had chosen. A few understood that the Zionists had become part of a vast relational network of Middle Eastern peoples. In any such network, the words and actions of each actor impact all the others; no one is merely a passive victim of others' choices. In this particular network, some Arabs as well as Jews sought to emulate the secular nationalist model they saw dominating Europe. An Arab nationalist

movement seeking independence from the Turkish empire was already well underway.

But most Zionists could not see this because they had become locked into, and blinded by, their dominant narrative. Their consciences did not want to admit that they were now empowered historical actors, because they would mean they bore some responsibility for eliciting enmity from others. It was easier to charge the enmity to an irrational anti-semitic hatred of the Jews, a hatred beyond their control. If their actions could neither evoke, intensify, nor alleviate their enemy's attitudes, then they could not bear any responsibility for the ongoing conflict. All they could do was to defend themselves by force. So it was appealing to interpret any Palestinian Arab resistance as evidence of sheer anti-semitism.

However the tradition that started with Pinsker said that when Jews were attacked by anti-Semites, the insecurity and powerlessness they felt were evidence of their moral weakness, self-doubt, and self-hatred. Every hint of weakness reminded the Zionists that they had not yet fully answered Pinsker's call to stand up proudly and manfully. So they fought back, not only to protect themselves physically but, even more, to protect themselves from their own self-doubts. Each time the Zionists asserted themselves against the Palestinians they could feel reassured that they were genuinely proud and self-reliant, that they were "rising manfully to full height." At the same time, they could feel reassured that they were morally innocent victims of anti-semitism.

But that interpretation created more problems than it solved. If the Zionists were still victims of an anti-semitism beyond their control to influence, then they were not yet agents of their own history. They were insisting on their passivity, the very condition they had hoped to escape. So they only heightened their negative self-image, their sense of powerlessness and insecurity. That, in turn, heightened their doubts about their own self-worth, wondering whether they could ever be normal. The natural response was to

take more actions that would assuage self-doubt. They had to go on showing that they were capable of exercising power, prove that they could hit back, like normal people.

Of course every time they hit back, the Palestinians were likely to hit back in response. The Zionists interpreted each new confrontation as further evidence of the Jews' vulnerability, passivity, and insecurity, which only intensified their feeling of self-doubt. And that, in turn, intensified their conviction that anti-semitism was eternal, that they would always be insecure. The only possible response was to strike back again—which locked them more firmly into their narrative and generated ever more insecurity. This narrative became so basic to their movement that it functioned as their foundational myth. The Zionists were trapped in a myth of national insecurity.

This myth was already firmly in place during the early years of Zionist immigration to Palestine. (The first major wave of immigrants came around 1905.) It was cemented by the tragedy of World War I. In 1917 Britain's foreign secretary, Lord Balfour, declared that his government would "view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people," though he added that Britain would not want to "prejudice the rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."[viii] At the same time, the British used T. E. Lawrence to promise the Arabs independence from the Turks in return for the Arabs' help in fighting the war. But after the war Britain itself took charge of Palestine under a League of Nations mandate. It is no coincidence that the first large scale violence between Zionists and Arabs broke out in 1919, fueled by the frustrations of seeing their nationalistic hopes dashed.

Throughout the British mandate period (1919 – 1947) most Zionists continued to interpret their own acts of force as the regrettably necessary actions of innocent victims. This gave them a satisfying conviction that all their actions were morally righteousness. But it also reinforced the fundamentals of the Zionist myth of insecurity: Our enemies threaten our very

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existence; we are wholly innocent, having done nothing at all to evoke such enmity; we must inflict enough defeats on our enemies to prove to them— and ourselves—our indomitable strength.

An important difference developed among them, though. The mainstream of Zionism, led by David Ben Gurion, thought it best to appear moderate, willing to make compromises, and hoping to limit violence. A new group known as Revisionists, led by the Vladimir Jabotinsky, asked (in effect), Why bother even thinking about the world's response? The world hates us anyway; nothing we do now can make the gentiles hate us more. Since we are surrounded by eternal enemies, the only way to insure our survival is to make it clear that we want all of Palestine, refuse any compromise, and maintain our strength and dominance. Since the Arabs only understand force, we must use force to insure our control of Palestine, by any means necessary.

A third and much smaller group, led by the philosopher Martin Buber, preached that it was wrong to blame the Arabs, as if the Jews' behavior had nothing to do with it. A central theme in Buber's philosophy was the freedom, and the obligation, to make moral choices and take responsibility for one's choices. He told the Zionists that the fate of their movement would be decided not by their opponents but by the choices they made. "It depends entirely on us," he said, "whether the Arabs treat us as welcome friends or hated enemies." By the late 1930s Buber was leading a small group of Jews committed to creating a single bi-national state, giving equal rights and equal power to both Jews and Arabs. But that group never gained any significant political influence.

The horrors of the Nazi Holocaust locked mainstream and Revisionist Zionists even more tightly into the myth of insecurity. By the mid-1940s, it seemed all too realistic to fear that the Jewish people might be not just grievously harmed but annihilated by anti-semites. The Zionist premise of eternal anti-semitism seemed much more convincing, too. The fear of anti-

semites and annihilation spurred the Jews to demand their own state. So their fear was deeply embedded in the foundations of the state of Israel, which declared its independence in 1948. Having a Jewish state did not bring any sense of real normalization. It merely created a new stage on which to play out the myth of insecurity.

II. The Myth of Insecurity in the State of Israel

Immediately after Israel declared independence it was plunged into war with several neighboring Arab states. Buyer declared that a victory for Israel would mean the defeat of Zionism. He predicted that a nation founded by war would always be insecure, always focus on defending itself, and too often act aggressively while using defense as a justification. That would lead Zionism down the path of maximizing power and creating separation between Jews and Arabs. But his views were embraced only by a very small minority of Israeli Jews.

Historians still fiercely debate both the causes and the courses of the 1948-9 war. Some find strong evidence that the new Jewish state welcomed war, knowing that its smaller but much better trained and equipped army would probably be victorious and expand Israel's territory—which is indeed what happened. Most historians now acknowledge that the Israeli forces intentionally drove many Palestinian Arabs from their homes, and many more fled voluntarily, never expecting what actually happened: Israeli refused to let them return home once the fighting stopped.

But there was very little debate about the war of independence among Jews at the time, nor in the following decades until quite recently. The vast majority of Jews saw it through the lens of the myth of insecurity. They assumed that Israel had been attacked for no legitimate reason; that nothing Israel did could affect the intentions of the Arabs, who would always aim to destroy Israel; that Israel was therefore totally innocent, even in the

matter of the homeless Palestinian refugees; that the only lesson for Israel was to remain ever on its guard and strong enough to fight and win again.

The State of Israel was born in the trap created by the original Zionist myth. It did not free the Jews from insecurity and make them feel normal. It only magnified the Jewish plight from the individual to the inter-state level. Israel became the Jew among the gentiles, writ large. Faced with full-scale conventional wars rather than mobs and pogroms, Israeli Jews naturally felt less secure, both physically and psychologically.

Israel became both the symbol and the vehicle of the Jews' vow that never again would they be victims. Perhaps more importantly, never again would they let themselves feel like victims. Every time the vow was repeated, though, and every time it was fulfilled by acts of violence, it kept alive the memory of the Jews' weakest hour. In Israel's early years, its schoolchildren were taught to be ashamed of the Holocaust, because it was the height of Jewish powerlessness. They were urged to show the world that Israel's power would put an end to this shameful era forever. But the more their teachers insisted on this, the more the students learned that the end of Jewish abnormality was uncertain, at best.

The archetypal show of Jewish force was the war Israel fought with its Arab neighbors in 1967. Though all historians agree that Israel fired the first shots, they fiercely debate everything else about the war, especially its causes. Some find strong evidence that Israel was itching for a fight. As with the 1948 war, though, there was and generally still is no debate in the Jewish community. The 1967 war, too, is seen through the lens of the myth of insecurity. It is assumed that the Arab nations were intent on destroying Israel, making Israel's victory (in only six days) purely a war of necessary self-defense. In the same vein, Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza are cast as necessary to defend the perpetually insecure Jewish state.

The renowned Holocaust theologian, Emil Fackenheim, gave the myth of insecurity a religious meaning. He argued that victory in the Six-Day War

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was a kind of salvation because without that victory not only Israel but the Jewish people would have been doomed. Yet survival was not really the ultimate goal in his view. He once told an audience that Israel might be destroyed by its enemies in the future. Still, he said, Zionism would have fulfilled its goal because then the Jews would do what any normal nation would do: They would go down fighting proudly, secure in their self-esteem (like men, Pinsker would have said).

Of course Fackenheim, like most other Jewish voices, insisted that all of Israel's military efforts were morally justified, because whenever Israel fought it was fighting for its survival. If the very existence of the state was at stake, then self-defense could seem like a morally impeccable justification for almost any deed. But the premise of the argument was still Jewish innocence, which meant in effect Jewish passivity—the belief that no policy changes by Israel could ever end or even reduce the Jews' insecurity.

Six Israeli-Arab wars and two intifadas have proven that when Israel fights, it will not "go down." Militarily, its existence is secure against every plausible threat. Yet the old myth of national insecurity still triumphs over present reality. The early Zionists could not imagine a Jewish state with such predominant power that its existence would be absolutely assured, even if it remained in conflict with its neighbors. Most Israeli Jews today, haunted by a fear of powerlessness, still cannot believe in that assurance.

Surely not all Israeli Jews seek a sense of security and normality through the exercise of power. But the majority, who do, block the path to peace. They can maintain their self-respect only by an endless round of acts of power. They see any conciliatory step by their government as a surrender, a return to political powerlessness, and thus a fatal blow to their sense of self-worth. So they want their government to continue on the path of confrontation. Every exercise of Israeli power naturally evokes Palestinian opposition and further enmity. As the Palestinians struggle to unite politically and offer a proposal for peace, the Israelis announce in advance that they

will reject the unified Palestinian government and its proposals, because their myth of insecurity tells them that the Palestinians are and must always been their implacable enemy. The insecurity tragically spirals on.

Henry Siegman, former head of the American Jewish Congress, wrote in the *New York Times*, about Netanyahu's message that "the whole world is against Israel and that Israelis are at risk of another Holocaust… is unfortunately still a more comforting message for too many Israelis." Siegman observed that this fear (which he called "pathological") "is invoked most frequently by Israelis themselves. The term for it in Israel is a '*galut* [diaspora] mentality,' the tendency of diaspora Jewry to see itself as friendless, isolated, and always at the edge of a looming pogrom."[ix]

An extensive research study confirmed that Israeli Jews are generally moved more by fear than anything else in viewing their conflict with the Palestinians. That leads Jews to "a selective and distorted processing of information aimed at preserving conflict-beliefs."[x] The myth of insecurity still reigns supreme.

So it is not surprising that Israel has acted out that myth by building a wall that is intended, some day, to physically separate the entire West Bank from Israel. The purported reason is to protect the Jews from physical attack by keeping out Palestinians. But, the effect (and perhaps the true purpose), is to wall in the Jews. As an Israeli columnist has written, Israel is "the world's last remaining legally mandated Jewish ghetto."

The columnist was writing about the political right in Israel. But his words sum up the dominant view among a majority of Zionists throughout the movement's history. They are "afraid of the world," so they want to "wall off Israel" and make it "a place where all the rules are different, exit and entry, citizenship and human rights, because the residents within are Jews. … A place which, if suffocating and insufferable, still seems safer than the scary world outside."

Now the inhabitants of the ghetto have infinitely more military force than those outside the walls, and they use that force to dominate their neighbors. But the myth of insecurity dictates that every act of violence will only reinforce their sense that the world outside is a scary place.

Moreover, the wall symbolizes the endless inability to see Israel's real impact upon the Palestinians, or even to see that Israel has any impact, any relationship at all with the Palestinians. So it helps to maintain the fiction that Palestinian anger comes solely from irrational anti-semitism that is beyond Israel's ability to influence.

The same kind of blindness marks Israel's relationship with the rest of the world. A growing chorus of criticism is directed at Israel from all over the world. But the myth of insecurity assumes that Israel must always be morally blameless. So most Israelis cannot see that the criticism may have any validity. The obvious way to explain it is to invoke the Zionist premise: the gentiles' eternal anti-semitism. Thus Israel cannot enter into any reasoned debate with its critics. Every criticism becomes further evidence that Israel is endangered by enemies and must prove itself yet again strong enough to defeat those enemies.

Most Israelis now realize, though, that their massive military capability cannot protect them from diplomatic and economic isolation. Only their one remaining ally of consequence—the United States— can do that. So the Israelis must pay some significant attention to the will of the U.S. government.

In 2000 President Bill Clinton brought the Israeli and Palestinian leaders to Camp David and tried to work out a peace settlement. It's often said that the Israeli leader, Ehud Barak, made the most generous offer imaginable, only to be turned down by Yassir Arafat. But what Barak offered was a Palestinian state on the West Bank that was a patchwork of separate little pieces of land. The New York Times recently called it quite rightly an archipelago, a huge bunch of islands of Palestinian land, all separated by

Israeli settlements and security roads.[xi] There was no chance that it could be a viable country.

  After the Camp David talks broke down, Clinton went back to the drawing board and came up with what he called his parameters: The Palestinian state would include virtually all of the West Bank. Israel would retain only a few large settlements near its 1967 border, and in return Palestine would get an equal amount of Israeli land, a one-for-one land swap. An international peacekeeping force would protect peace and security in the region. The two parties and the United Nations would declare the conflict resolved.[xii]

  What about the two most difficult issues, the Palestinian refugees and Jerusalem? Clinton suggested that Israel would accept only as many refugees as it was willing to take. About a year later, Arafat wrote an op-ed in the New York Times that clear implied agreement on that point. He said the Palestinians would take mainly financial compensation for all that they lost in their 1948 catastrophe.[xiii] In recent years Palestinian negotiator Nabil Sha'ath repeated that offer. Since then, many who support the Clinton parameters have talked about small numbers of Palestinians, perhaps a few thousand, actually moving to Israel. A Palestinian state will need significant international aid to get started in any event, so this could easily be given as the compensation Arafat wrote about.

  On Jerusalem, Clinton suggested that both nations should share it and establish their capitals there, as they wish. Jews would control their most sacred site, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, while Palestinians would control the sacred Muslims mosques on the Mount itself. This is totally feasible. In fact a colleague of mine who lived and did research in Jerusalem over 20 years ago told me way back then that Jerusalem city officials showed him the detailed plans they had written up for dividing the city. Much more recently, Israel's last prime minister, Ehud Olmert, declared

publicly that his nation would have to share Jerusalem with a new Palestinian state.

In January of 2001 Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met again, at Taaba in the Sinai, and came close to an agreement based on the Clinton parameters. Though there's dispute about exactly why the talks collapsed, the fact that they almost succeeded showed the world that something much like the Clinton parameters would inevitably be the outline of a reasonable resolution.

Some high-level Israeli and Palestinian political figures and technical specialists were not willing to give up. They started meeting in Geneva to hammer out a more detailed draft agreement based on the Clinton parameters.[xiv] Seven years ago they announced it to the world. This Geneva Accord has been widely circulated to show that thoughtful leaders from both sides can wrestle with the devil in the details and come out successful.

We also have evidence that even the very top leaders on both sides, who must face the voters, might be able to agree to such a deal. The previous Israeli leader, Olmert, recently said in a speech that while he was in office he negotiated secretly with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas. The two had come "this close" to an agreement, he said, holding up two fingers.[xv]

The failure of these negotiations is always charged to a lack of political will. On the Israeli side, though, political life is driven by the myth of insecurity. No political leader can survive without affirming that Israel has some mortal enemy dedicated to destroying it. That is the foundation of the nation's political discourse and, some would say, of its very national identity. Since the goal is not to defeat any particular enemy but to keep the myth alive, the name of the enemy can easily change. When peace becomes possible with one enemy, the Israelis move on to another.

At first the enemy was a generic faceless mass called "the Arabs." Once Israel made peace with Egypt and clearly had peaceable relations

with Jordan, the enemy was reduced to specific Arab states. During the 1980s, the sense of enmity focused more on "the Palestinians." After the 1993 Oslo agreements, the enemy became Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Islamist groups. In 2001, Yasser Arafat and his ruling circle were put back in the category of enemy, along with Saddam Hussein. After Arafat died, the scope of the enemy was refocused on Hamas, Hezbollah, and other Islamist groups, and Iran joined them at the top of the list. As Hamas leaders push for a ceasefire and declare their willingness to accept a two-state solution,[xvi] it is easy to imagine—in fact perhaps likely—that Israel will some day no longer label Hamas an enemy. It is even possible to imagine Israel and Iran coming to some détente.

What seems impossible to imagine, at least now, is Israeli political and cultural life without a myth of insecurity. What would it mean to be an Israeli Jew without an enemy to fear? How would Israeli Jews build a new sense of identity not based on perpetual insecurity? That is the great challenge that Israel must eventually face.

III.   The Myth and the American Jewish Community

Until the 1930s, a sizeable portion of the U.S. Jewish community was skeptical, at best, about the Zionist project. America was their promised land. Knowledge of the Holocaust gave a great boost to support for a Jewish state. But once that state was established in 1948, the passion for Israel subsided here. In the 1950s, when sociologists asked Jews what made them different from gentiles, the answers they got rarely mentioned any special affinity for the state or land of Israel. In fact, most people said that there was no special value or belief or behavior that made them different from their gentile neighbors. The only thing that made them different was

that their friends were Jews. Being Jewish was mainly a social thing. Jews hung out with other Jews.

These Jews did not complain a whole lot about anti-semitism either. Many of them had experienced significant anti-semitism in the pre-World War II days. They knew it was still around. But they knew that things were far better than they had been, and they looked forward to even more social acceptance in the future. So it made sense to overlook the vestiges of anti-semitism, to assume it would keep on diminishing until it gradually disappeared.

When did Jews begin to tell the myth of Israel that prevails today? This is a rare situation where a historian of religions can point to a very precise time, in fact a precise week, when a new story became the official story of a community. It was the second week of June, 1967, when Israel and its Arab neighbors fought a six-day war. Jews flocked to their synagogues, not only to pray for Israel, but to inaugurate (though they did not know it) a new form of Judaism based on their new official story. America's most eminent historian of Judaism, Rabbi Jacob Neusner, has called this new form "the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption."[xvii] The "Holocaust" part represents the belief that anti-semitism is an eternal threat to Jews everyone. The "Redemption" part represents the twin beliefs that Jews have a special relationship with the land of Israel and that only in Israel can they hope to be safe, redeemed from that eternal threat.

These beliefs, and the myth built upon them, were certainly not totally new. All of the elements had been around for a long time.   Yet those elements had not been fused so tightly into a single integrated myth. Nor had they been so central in American Jewish life before the six-day war. Every history of American Jewish life describes this dramatic change. So far, there is no commonly accepted theory to explain why it happened. So I want to offer my own theory.

Several factors came together in June, 1967. One was a kind of emptiness in American Jewish life, a sense that no one quite knew what special values Jews were supposed to hold just because they were Jews. For most of them it was just a matter of socializing with other Jews. Perhaps there was an unconscious sense that Judaism ought to mean something more than that.

Of course, 1967 was a time when many people in the U.S. were beginning to explore new possibilities for meaning and identity. Issues of individual and group identity became more urgent than before. Our whole society was entering a brief era when everything seemed open to question. Remember, June, 1967, wasn't only the time of the six-day war. It was also the beginning of San Francisco's summer of love. For many Americans, it was a time of cultural confusion, a time when U.S. society seemed to be falling apart. In such a time, it is quite common that individuals and groups will seize upon one particular story that gives them a highly structured sense of meaning. If the story seems to answer their questions and make sense out of confusing times, they will cling to it tightly, no matter what happens.

For Jews, the question of ethnic identity was especially acute. African-Americans were asserting their right to equality more powerfully than ever before. Some Jews had expressed their Jewish identity by working with the civil rights movement. By 1967, many of these Jews were disturbed, or even scared, by the rise of the black power movement. They were no longer sure that the cause of racial justice had any place for white people. Yet they could see that it was becoming acceptable in liberal circles to assert one's ethnic identity. African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and native Americans were all standing up as oppressed people demanding their rights.

This placed the Jews in a real quandary. As white people, they could easily be classed with the oppressors. When tensions broke out in inner city ghettos, individual Jews were sometimes identified as oppressors. This was

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an uncomfortable feeling, of course, especially for the many Jews who genuinely sympathized with the cause of people of color.

At the same time, the growing antiwar movement was raising another very disturbing question: Perhaps the United States itself was not a force for freedom, but rather a force for oppression, in Vietnam. If the U.S. was the oppressor in Vietnam, this would make all Jews, along with all other Americans, oppressors as well. By 1967, a new story was emerging to shape the experience of all Americans as they watched the events of the day unfold. This story said that every person was either with the oppressors or the oppressed. In Camus' terms, everyone was either an executioner or a victim. It was the most fundamental moral choice, and no one could avoid making it. So how could Jews be sure that, when oppression arose, they were on the right side? How could they be sure they were victims and not executioners?

One possibility was to depict themselves as perpetual victims of anti-semitism. However, American Jews did not want to believe that they would always be threatened by anti-semitism simply because they lived in the diaspora. They hoped that anti-semitism was gradually fading away, allowing them to live fully and freely as Americans. How could they feel fully accepted, yet still count themselves among the oppressed?

The events of June, 1967, solved that problem. For Jews around the world, and here in the U.S., there was no doubt that the Arabs were the aggressors and Israel the victim. By picturing Israel as a small, weak, victimized nation, and then identifying themselves with Israel, Jews could feel certain that they were among the oppressed. They could see the U.S. as a place where Jews were increasingly accepted, but still view themselves as victims of persecution. So American Jews "discovered" a special, almost mystical tie between every Jew and the holy land. If they were tied to Israel, and Israel was being persecuted, they were being persecuted. So they

could not be among the persecutors. There could be no doubt about which side of the moral divide they were on. That question was laid to rest.

Six days later, however, a new problem had emerged. The Israeli army had proven itself superior in every way to the Egyptians, Jordanians, and Syrians combined. Israel now possessed not only Jerusalem, but all of the West Bank and Gaza. In the Jewish community, it seemed obvious that this was something to celebrate. Few people consciously addressed the problem, but it was obvious if you stopped to think about it. How could such a triumphant military power call itself a small, weak victim? If Israel was so powerful, could Jews still be sure they were on the side of the oppressed? This problem was especially acute for American Jews, who could not express their tie with Israel in political terms. Politically, they wanted to be 100% American. They had to express their Jewishness as a religious or cultural identity. So they had to make support for the political state of Israel a religious or cultural value. For virtually all of them, that meant making support for Israel a moral and ethical value. They could not celebrate Jewish power and military victory as good in and of itself. They had to give it an ethical meaning.

Power could have an ethical meaning as long as it was used only to fight oppression. Jews could give Israel's power a moral value as long as they viewed Israel as a victim of aggression.   They could celebrate Israel's military victory as long as they believed it a justified and necessary act of self-defense. By identifying with Israel, they could participate in that act of power and feel perfectly moral at the same time.

Identifying with Israel meant making Zionism the center of Jewish life. Few American Jews became Zionists in the full sense, since that would require actually moving to Israel. For most, Zionism meant simply supporting both the concept and the reality of the Jewish state. It meant equating the fate of Israel with the fate of every Jew, everywhere.

It is no coincidence that, just when American Jews "discovered" their unbreakable bond with Israel, they also "discovered" the unique importance of the Nazi Holocaust in every Jew's life. Until 1967, Jews did not talk a great deal about the Holocaust. But the six-day war catapulted the memory of the Holocaust into the center of Jewish life. The Holocaust was offered as crucial proof that anti-semitism is indeed eternal, that Jews are indeed perpetually threatened by irrational hatred and oppression. This, in turn, became the supposed proof that all Arabs were motivated by the same hatred that had moved the Nazis to their murderous project. Once this premise was accepted, there could be no doubt that Israel's military victory was a necessary act of self-defense, and therefore absolutely morally justified. This is why the Holocaust and Israel were linked so closely in what Neusner calls "the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption." The memory of the Holocaust provided the crucial link between the perception of Jews as oppressed victims and the sense of pride in Israel's achievements and its power.

Most Jews still do not have to live differently from their gentile neighbors, because too much difference might make them potential targets of stigma, discrimination, and oppression. Yet in order to sustain their new-found form of Judaism, Jews must exaggerate or overestimate their own experience of anti-semitism. Many seem eager to trade stories of anti-semitism and hear their leaders do the same, as if they enjoy hearing bad news. That is how they convince themselves that Israel's motives are always pure and innocent, which means that Jewish power is always morally justified—even when the facts on the ground (or, more precisely, viewed on television) seem to raise troubling questions about the morality of Israeli policies.

Within the terms of the dominant doctrine, every threat must be countered. Fighting back is a way to prove both that Jews are being victimized and that Jews have power. Since Israel has the most powerful

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military in the Middle East, when it responds to threat it usually uses major force. Naturally, this evokes angry, sometimes violent, responses. Jews take those responses as proof of threat and reason for even more forceful response. Military conflict serves as a kind of ritual performance, a way to act out their beliefs and confirm their basic premise that Jews, the perpetual victims, always use their power in a morally justified cause.

Tragically, this performance is a ritual sacrifice in which far too many real people die. Most of them are Arabs. Some are Jews. This hardly makes Israel more secure. On the contrary, it perpetuates the physical facts of insecurity. Here in the U.S., as well as in Israel, it also perpetuates and exacerbates the psychological facts of fear, anxiety, and defensiveness in Jewish life. It demands a sense of perpetual victimhood. It creates a culture of victimization. This is a high price to pay.

Yet many Jews have been, and still are, willing to pay that price. Perhaps this tells us that human beings find security not in physical safety, nor in freedom from fear, but in beliefs that offer a firmly fixed, immutable, unquestioned sense of meaning and identity. As long as "the Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption" gives them meaning and identity, Jews will cling to it and repeat its ritual performances, regardless of the price. Since the early years of the 21st century, a steadily growing number of Jews have been questioning—and some overtly rejecting—the myth of Israel's insecurity with all that it entails. Whether this trend will continue, and if so how rapidly it will accelerate, is the great question for the American Jewish community.

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