

[Ideas](#)

Israel and those who love it are stuck in a hopeless present. Can we ever get back to the future?

Those of us who are not in power need to reawaken the possibility of hope, writes the Shalom Hartman Institute's Yehuda Kurtzer.

[Yehuda Kurtzer](#) May 5, 2025



A sunrise seen from Tel Aviv, Feb. 12, 2025. (Shlomo Roded via the PikiWiki)

I've always appreciated the present-tense quality of Yom Ha'atzmaut. Coming right after Yom HaZikaron, a day of remembering past losses, it is like a full day of "[dayenu](#)" prayer, a collective recognition of where we are and how far we have come. In Israel, Israelis gather in public parks and in backyards, under their vines and fig trees. I am skeptical of making big meaningful proclamations on Yom Ha'atzmaut; this year I sat with friends on the deck eating corn schnitzel and singing folk songs.

But then the day ends, and the work begins again, as it always does. This year I can't shake the sense that Israel — and those of us who support it from afar — are stuck in a hopeless present tied too tightly to the traumas of the recent past. To pause in the present one day a year is a blessing; to live permanently while stuck in the present feels like a curse.

The war in Gaza is unending, and [now resumes with a massive call-up](#). The prime minister continues to define victory as Hamas' utter defeat, which Hamas will never concede and

which may be a “supreme goal” that can never be decisively reached. At earlier phases in the history of Zionism, we celebrated partial victories – most famously in the acceptance of the [Partition Plan](#) — and moved forward toward other attainable goals. Why then do Israel’s current leaders insist on the kind of absolute outcomes that make it impossible to get out of the present morass?

Meanwhile, only the extremists are speaking about the future. In Israel, the empowered right is building horrific plans for settling Gaza and ethnically cleansing its inhabitants; if that leads to the fighting lasting indefinitely, it seems they will be content. Out here in the West, the ascendant fabulist left also talks about a radical new future, through its own dystopian vision for the dismantling of Israel.

Most of us, though, most Israelis, and most of us who support Israel from afar? We are stuck in a state of dreams arrested, waiting for a future that won’t come if we don’t even try to envision it.

We are paying a high cost for this stuckness.

Israeli families are suffering financially, psychically and physically, sending their loved ones *again* into an unending war, holding up a fraying home front, praying that it — that they — will not be shattered.

Our hostages, not the priority of the country that once pledged to never leave its people behind, are living hopeless lives — so close, so far away. The bodies of hostages who were already killed remain to be buried.

So long as we are stuck in this present, the Palestinian civilians in Gaza too are stuck. They cannot live, heal, recover or mobilize further against Hamas and for better alternatives. Palestinian parents cannot offer their children a better future.

So long as we are stuck in this present, Israel’s visions and dreams of living in a new Middle East, normalizing with its neighbors, thriving in the family of nations, are being held back by its government’s choices.

And so long as Israel is stuck in this present, American Jews are stuck as well. Our institutions are stuck in defensive mode, with far more attention paid to rapid reaction to the news cycle than to the opportunities here to capitalize on the “surge” in Jewish life and other critical priorities. American Jews are stretched to their moral limits by the Israeli government’s intransigence in continuing to fight this war this way. And our community has internalized “war mode” — the fight against Hamas there, the fight against antisemitism here — in ways that are preventing us from doing the constructive pro-democracy work that will stabilize our societies and protect us in the long run.

There are always alternative possible futures than the ones that seem inaccessible when we are stuck in the present. This is a “plastic hour” — a term coined by the philosopher Gershom Scholem to describe historical moments when new possibilities can emerge and that require human intervention and choice in those moments to influence the course of history. Remaining stuck is a choice; the alternative is moral imagination and wisdom that the Israeli government may lack but we do not endorse.

It would have been sufficient, at many moments in the past year, to take pride in the immense military successes of the war as a means of declaring victory, to choose to prioritize the hostages even at the cost of continuing the war to allow Israelis to embrace one another and to resume their lives, and to end the war for the sake of both Israelis and Palestinians to heal and to recover. There is only so much loyalty to the present that can be demanded of people without providing them hope for the future, and we have passed that threshold. This insistence on stuckness is then not just a terrible moral and political choice, but also psychologically corrosive for our people.

What will it take for us to get moving again? Those of us who are not in power need to reawaken the possibility of hope — to be the kind of people who will things into being — and we need to ensure the viability of those other possible futures. This can include investments in Israel’s struggling coexistence and peace-building sectors, and parallel efforts to rebuild trust between Jews and our neighbors here as well. We can push harder for conversations about the future of postwar Israel and plans to rebuild hope and trust for the Palestinian people for the days after Hamas rule. We can accelerate American Jewish conversations about what we’ve learned from these 18 months and what we can now do differently in American Jewish education and American Jewish politics. Building hope, change and sustainability travel hand in hand. And since the political sands will inevitably shift one day, we’d better be among those planning for that future and prepared to seize those moments.

And ultimately, we can simply promote a new discourse about hope for our weary people who see no light at the end of the tunnel. The belief in hope and the trust in incremental process is the Zionist way and the Jewish way. The [Talmud tells the story of two sages, Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta](#), walking through the Arbel Valley at that liminal moment between darkness and light. When the first dawn began to break, Rabbi Hiyya said to Rabbi Shimon: “This is the redemption of Israel: At first it comes slowly by slowly, and as it progresses its light increases.”

Yom HaZikaron, the day of the past, is passed; Yom Ha’atzmaut, the day of the present, has ended. I hope our leaders will look for light instead of doubling down on darkness. These 18

months should be sufficient as the darkest time before the dawn. The future for Zionism, the Jewish people, the Palestinians, and the State of Israel needs to start today.

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