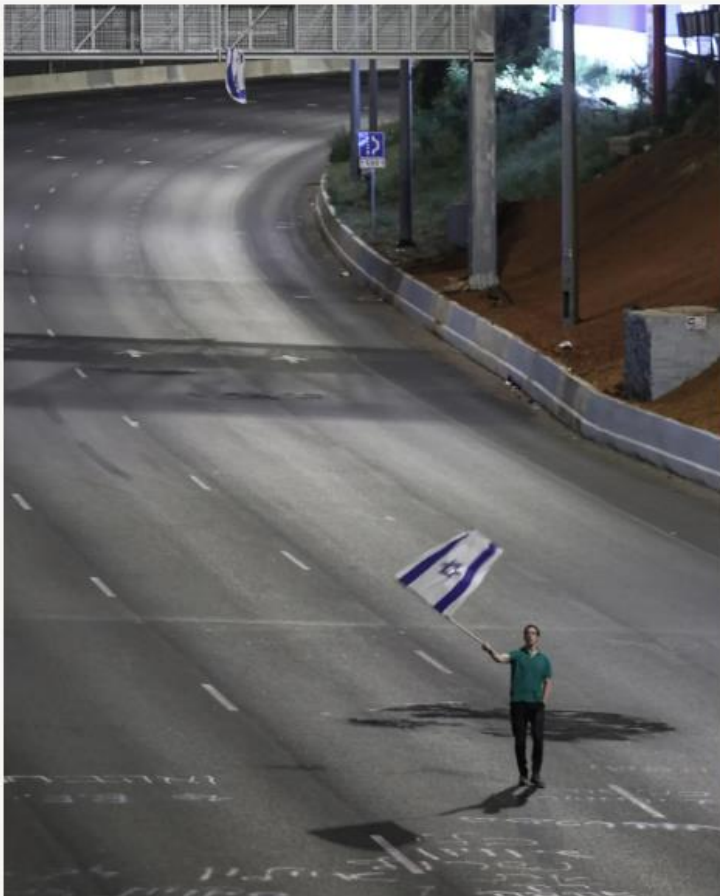


## Zionism's Moment of Decision

The massive protests preceding Israel's 75th birthday have resurrected a century-old question that now demands an answer: A Jewish state or state for Jews?

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'What is going on in Israel now has passed from the realm of the political to the metaphysical, which means that compromise is not possible' ILIA YEFIMOVICH/PICTURE ALLIANCE VIA GETTY IMAGES

To mark the 75th anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel, Tablet is publishing [Zionism: The Tablet Guide](#), edited by Liel Leibovitz. The book features primary essays by Zionism's utopian founders, modern commentary and reporting, and interviews with modern political leaders and critics alike.

Having just returned from Israel, the country where I was born and grew up, and of which I am still a

proud citizen, I apologize for being the bearer of bad news: There will be no easy, sane, or rational end to the protest movement that erupted in response to the ruling coalition's proposed judicial reforms. In fact, the content of those reforms has ceased to matter to anyone involved on either side. The government's promise to temporarily halt the legislation and convene a broad-based committee tasked with finding a compromise under the supervision of President Herzog has barely registered with the protesters, and one major member of the opposition, the Labor Party, has already quit the negotiations. Nor did a string of gruesome terror attacks, coming on the heels of Passover, shift the collective focus away from taking to the streets. What is going on in Israel now has passed from the realm of the political to the metaphysical, which means that compromise is not possible. Instead, day by day, the arguments are getting louder and more cutting, and animosity is everywhere on display.

This is because Israelis realize, consciously or not, that they're no longer arguing about a series of proposed bills designed to change the balance of power between the executive and the judiciary

branches. Nor are they arguing about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his coalition. Nor does it matter whether Netanyahu continues to lead his coalition, or steps down, or offers Benny Gantz the job of defense minister. Nor does it have anything to do with Jewish or Muslim demography, or with a future Palestinian state—whether or not such an entity ever exists, or doesn't exist, in any part of the West Bank or Jordan.

Israelis aren't arguing about politics anymore. They are fighting about the future, not only of Israel but of Zionism, the miraculous movement that, in the span of one century, freed the Jews from their respective houses of bondage, returned them to their indigenous homeland, taught them the spells of sovereignty, and powered their miniscule nation's growth from embattled weakling to global powerhouse. And as a result, this is strictly an inter-Jewish affair, one pitting millennia of Jewish particularity against the promise of universalism once embodied in the Catholic Church, then in the Enlightenment, and now in the technocratic politics that unite the civilized right and the progressive left in the club of advanced countries that has, with

increasing misgivings, included Israel among their number.

It's a fight that isn't going to end quickly, or with anything remotely resembling a compromise, because it's about a question so central even the brave and prescient founders of the country avoided answering it. Israelis must now decide if they want a state for Jews, or a Jewish state.

Writing in 1888, the critic and essayist Asher Zvi Ginsberg, better known as Ahad Ha'am, or One of the People, argued that merely ushering scores of Jews to Eretz Yisrael would achieve little. Unless the Jews created a robust Jewish culture, he thundered, their experiment at self-government would produce just another diaspora, this one more tragic for taking root in the sacred soil of the Promised Land. Israel, he concluded, needed to become a spiritual center, a state unlike any other on Earth.

To today's protesters, even the decidedly secular Ahad Ha'am's answer sounds like more of a threat than a promise. Late at night at a Tel Aviv sidewalk cafe, I asked one of the leaders of the massive demonstrations now entering their 15th week to share with me her vision for Israel's future. She

declined to be identified by name—the movement’s leaders are reluctant to talk about who is organizing what, or paid for by whom—but she was happy to answer my question. “We’re here because we want this to be a normal state, you understand?” she said, “just like the United States or France or Germany. We don’t want this country to be taken over by those fanatics with their beards and their religion.”

This insistence on normalcy, on being a state like any other, is at the heart of the Second Israel theory, popularized by the academic and journalist Avishai Ben Haim. Israel’s defining political struggle, Ben Haim argued in 2022, wasn’t between left or right, or even the religious and the secular, but between representatives of the First and the Second Israel. In Ben Haim’s analysis, the First Israel comprised the country’s traditional elites, the largely socialist and largely Ashkenazi milieu that presided over Israel’s coming into being, while the Second Israel included Israel’s Mizrahi Jews and its growing Orthodox population. While the two Israels might coexist uneasily for however long within the same body politic, they were in fact fundamentally different and opposing entities.

The First Israel measured success by how closely it resembled the West, which meant celebrating everything from big IPOs to Netflix deals. The Second Israel realized it was very much a product of the East, which meant doubling down on family, tradition, and nation. For the First Israel, Jewish values were tolerable only as long as they didn't interfere with the dictates of cosmopolitanism; for the Second Israel, democracy was just another name for the sort of compromises that Judaism, in its most moderate and open-minded iteration, generates naturally and with ease. For the First Israel, the long tail of Judaism is just a historically contingent addendum to the values and practices of other Western countries, such as modern technocapitalism and 21st-century iterations of democratic elitism. For the Second Israel, the reverse is true.

These are not merely intellectual distinctions for professors and pundits to parse. They are, increasingly, concrete questions for policymakers, administrators, and judges to address. Take, for example, the case of Messiah in the Square, a large prayer event planned by several Orthodox organizers in the heart of Tel Aviv in 2018. Because

most of the rally's participants weren't comfortable sitting next to members of the opposite sex, its organizers devised a solution: They informed the municipality that they'd like to create two distinct seating areas, one where men and women would be separated by a divider and another where anyone who wished to could sit together in an all-gender environment. The municipality refused; separate, it argued, was never equal, even if that was what event participants themselves requested, and even if alternatives were available to whoever wished to participate otherwise.

The court intervened, and the event was allowed to go on as planned, but similar lawsuits raising ever more vexing questions kept popping up: Could a private institution receiving no state funding offer classes open only to men or only to women? Did the government have the right to prohibit public transportation on Shabbat? Are immigration policies that favor Jews inherently discriminatory, or an essential part of both the *raison d'être* and practice of a self-proclaimed Jewish state?

Lacking a constitution, Israelis of both camps are left with second-order quibbles over who gets the final say, with elected officials and the courts each

offering arguments—sometimes valid, often imperfect—about why they ought to be the ultimate adjudicators. Nor is attempting to finally write out a national constitution, as some hopeful proceduralist types recommend, likely to end the question of what the State of Israel ought to be to its citizens: The task flummoxed generations of Israeli leaders, from David Ben-Gurion onward, all of whom eventually opted for deliberate ambiguity instead. The reason for their reluctance is simple: They were all dreading precisely the sort of showdown Israel is living through right now, one that calls for a decision between two fundamentally different sets of values and worldviews, neither one of which is willing or able to compromise with the other because they are, in fact, incompatible.

The fight that Israelis are engaged in now is about where they wish to live—not geographically, but within two radically different historical contexts, offering two radically different visions of Israel's future. Israelis are choosing between, on the one hand, a state that offers Jews the freedom to live according to the dictates of their tradition, and on the other one that insists on strict adherence to



universalist values as the price for the acceptance of Jews as a people like any other.

Which is why invoking the word “democratic” here, as many of the street protesters and their supporters in the U.S. and in Western European governments have done, badly misunderstands the actual terms of the debate. A Jewish state could easily be fully democratic. But a state of Jews has no real reason to make special accommodations for any faith-based particularities, including those of practicing Jews—even if a majority of Israelis so desire, and even if no one’s rights are jeopardized as a result. The protesters who insist on “our democracy,” like their counterparts in the United States, are not defending the actual outcome of an election, which they lost. Rather, they are insisting that elections merely deliver a hollow form of democracy, and that to make a government for, of, and by the people valid, you have to make sure that the people who run it have the right ideas, or else.

What I saw in the streets of Tel Aviv this past month was that the shaky *modus vivendi* that let the First Israel coexist with the Second Israel has come to an end, in large part because the First Israel is—perhaps rightly, from its point of view—unwilling to

allow a temporary electoral result to serve as cover for the Second Israel taking power. We don't want to live in a theocracy like Iran, the protesters, some of whom I have known since childhood, told me; instead, they want to live in a "normal country," like Sweden. And if that means emulating Sweden's ban on kosher ritual slaughter, say, so be it—it was high time, my friends said, to rid ourselves of primitive practices that no longer have any place in the modern world.

Like any person who lives and works in a secular Western society, I understand this point of view completely. The truth is, that unless you believe in Israeli exceptionalism, in the biblical covenant of divine election, and in the sacred bond between the Jewish people, its creator, and its promised land, there's no reason, under any condition, to tolerate much deviance from the broadest and most inclusionary contours of every other liberal Western democracy. Why should Israel be an exception?

The question of Jewish exceptionalism is not admissible before the bar of universal justice. That is why no resolution to the protests that are tearing the country apart is likely forthcoming: The people

marching in the streets of Tel Aviv want to make sure theirs is a country like any other, one that mandates mixed-gender seating for everyone, where malls are open on Yom Kippur, and that the benighted bigots who insist otherwise are kept safely away from the levers of power. You can focus, like Ben Haim, on the inherently racialized undertone of so much of these protests—Mizrahi Israelis, who overwhelmingly support Netanyahu, are routinely characterized as uncultured rubes too simple to understand intricate ideas like global finance and blockchain, let alone international relations. But you hardly need that added layer to understand the depth of the drama.

When Theodor Herzl, eager to show the British government that he was a serious statesman worthy of their trust, agreed to send an exploratory delegation to Africa to investigate the possibility of an alternative location for a Jewish state, he was applauded by his peers, educated and affluent Jews from Western Europe. It was the Eastern bloc, relatively young and comparatively poor but also more likely than the enlightened Westerners to be just a generation or so removed from Yiddishkeit, that refused to entertain any option that didn't lead

the Jewish people back to Jerusalem. These tensions could be put on ice while Zionism was achieving its key task, that of securing a Jewish homeland. But now that it has, it's back to the foundational dispute. At its heart is a cutting question: What is Zionism?

If you believe Zionism to be merely a movement for Jewish sovereignty in Israel, then it accomplished its historic mission 75 years ago, and ought to be retired. But if you believe that it is a Jewish liberation movement whose work begins, not ends, with the establishment of a Jewish state and whose energies come from the redemptive vision of the prophets of Israel, then Zionism ought to be recharged and tasked with nothing less than the refounding of the State of Israel—this time as a Jewish state, rather than simply a state for Jews. Two-thirds of Israelis, more or less, want just that.

The one-third that doesn't shouldn't be expected to bow down. Their pain is palpable, and their frustrations are real. They are right when they say that the country their opponents imagine has nothing to do with the one they and their ancestors built. They were hoping they could be Israelis, a new breed of person, and here come their neighbors to remind them that they are Jews. This is why so

many of the country's cultural elite cringed a few years back when a popular magazine asked Omer Adam, the megapopular singer who is among the greatest icons of the Second Israel, what he considered to be quintessentially Israeli. Easy, Adam replied: putting on tefillin. His answer indicated that—to him, and to his fans—Israel had no meaning and no reason to exist other than in the context of the ancient and eternal Jewish story, a story which the majority of the First Israel feels is at best a genial abstraction and at worst an invitation to theocracy, misogyny, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice and oppression.

How this struggle will end is too soon to tell. But what's obvious is that soft appeals to brotherhood and shared destiny aren't likely to resolve it. The debate we're having right now is a century in the making, and the only way out is to go through it. It's time for Israel to choose.