

Sephardim, Russians and Ethiopians, Druze, Bedouin, and Palestinians—to be able to say that they are *am hofshi, be'artzeinu* (a free people, in our own land)? I cry when I read the news, wondering how it happened that our beloved country came to be detoured and even devoured by endless corruption and sexual assault scandals, bruised perhaps irreparably by the personal and political failures of its leaders. And I cry when I hear that 1 million Israeli children go to bed hungry each night, and that Israel has one of the greatest gaps between the haves and the have-nots in the modern industrialized world.

But most of all I cry for the intractability of the conflict with the Palestinian people. My heart breaks again and again over the terror, violence, and hatred that too often characterize the Palestinian response to Israel. I weep for the thousands of lives lost to this long war. At the same time, my heart breaks over our unwillingness to look long and hard at what Israel and those of us who love it have neglected to do in the pursuit of peace. I weep over the last forty years, during which the occupation has not only sown misery and hopelessness for the Palestinian people, but has also cost Israel so much in blood and soul.

Haim Gouri taught us that we are a people of “ups and downs, euphoria and pathos, pride and pique. Everything about us is drastic.... Every day there is a sudden sunrise and an equally dramatic sunset, but there is no twilight.” *Hazal* [the ancient Sages] wrote: “The Jewish People is compared to the dust of the ground and to the stars of the sky. When they sink, they sink down to the dust; when they rise, they rise into the stars.”

My prayer for those who love this tiny country of so many tears and such delicious chocolate is that we never lose the will to reengage, to reimagine what is possible in a country built on the foundational principles of the Jewish people: that every human being has innate dignity and worth, that justice must prevail over chaos, that peace is always possible. I believe that we can still build an Israel that reflects the best of what our people has to offer the world. And it is this prayer that makes the tears that I shed over Israel tears of pride and joy, and tears of grief, but never, never tears of despair.



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“I see Israel, the state and the society, as the great collective accomplishment of the Jewish people in the twentieth century.... But the essential moral failing of Israel—its inability to deal fairly with the rights and even the full humanity of the other people with whom it shares a homeland—remains deeply troubling.”

I first visited Israel in 1961, six years before the Six Day War and Israel's conquest of the Old City of Jerusalem. In those days you could go up to the belltower of Notre Dame Monastery, right on the city divide, and for a fifty-grush fee you could get a look over the Old City wall and peer into its marketplace. During that first visit, a year of study and teaching, the holy Jerusalem of my dreams and fantasies was transformed into a real place. I loved the real Jerusalem—its people, markets, parks, and cafes.

But it was no longer the Jerusalem of my prayers, of perfect wholeness, of messianic dreams. That Jerusalem, I decided, must reside over there, inside the Old City wall, a place I could not reach.

When I went back after the war, I was able to walk through those markets, seeing the difficult conditions in which Jerusalem's Arabs lived and feeling the hostility behind their masks of commerce-driven friendliness. The markets were beautiful in their own backward way, and I was drawn to them frequently. But they were not holy; the air I breathed in them was not that of redemption. Old Jerusalem, too, became real, even profane, as I came to understand the deep conflict between its diverse inhabitants.

Where, then, was holy Jerusalem? I looked up at the Temple Mount, beyond the Western Wall, and decided that was where the true Holy City lay. Respecting both strict *halakhah* and Muslim



sensibilities, I decided I would not go up there, and I still have not done so, despite perhaps thirty trips to Jerusalem since then. But the truth is that it is neither Jewish nor Muslim strictures that have held me back. I fear that this Jerusalem, also, might turn out to be profane, and then there would be no holy place on earth at all. I cannot allow that to happen.

This self-imposed taboo is a metaphor for much of my relationship with Israel. I so wanted to believe in it fully—in the rightness of our cause, in the high humanitarian ideals it represented, in the “purity of arms” of its soldiers, in the writing of poetry in Hebrew once again, in the clearing of swamps, the eradication of mosquitoes, and the raising of health standards throughout the Middle East, for Jew and Arab alike. This was the Israel of my childhood dreams, the Israel I believed in fully when watching Abba Eban address the United Nations, when hearing about David Ben-Gurion’s interest in the Bible and in Buddhist meditation, when corresponding in childish Hebrew with pen pals in Pardes Hanna, when reading the first Hebrew novel I mastered, S. Y. Agnon’s *In the Heart of the Seas*, the tale of a fantasy journey to the Holy Land, many centuries ago.

That Israel got lost, of course, in the clash with reality. If it continues to exist somewhere behind a wall, that wall stands deep within my own heart. Meanwhile, I have indeed come to love the real Israel, the one I visit so frequently and where I have many friends. I love the richness and naturalness of its Jewish culture, so much of which is borne by the Hebrew language itself. I love the directness of human encounter you have there, as though you are always dealing—and arguing—with half-familiar members of your own extended family. I love the closeness of Jewish historical memory that Israel represents, so dulled and almost forgotten among luxury-bathed American Jews.

But that love combines with a deep sense of betrayal, disappointment, and hurt that I also feel when visiting Israel. In recent years, I have refused to visit Jewish settlements across the Green Line. My feeling since 1967 has been that this territory belongs to the Arabs, and should be kept in trust to be given to them when they are

ready to make true peace. Settling that land in seemingly irreversible ways, creating “facts on the ground,” as they were called, betrayed the Zionist dream. It (combined with ongoing Arab intransigence, of which there is plenty, I know) has made a two-state solution nearly impossible. Without a two-state solution, I believe, Israel is impossible and will not survive.

Even inside the State’s borders, the ongoing discrimination against Arabs, who have been treated at best as second-class citizens for half a century, is a terrible stain on the moral reputation of the entire Jewish people. The inability of most Israelis, both individually and institutionally, to treat the Arab population with dignity, even to the point of learning their language, marks a major failing in the Zionist enterprise. One would have thought that post-Holocaust Jews would know what it is to be a minority, and would treat others in our midst as the Bible tells us to treat strangers. But this has been far from the case.

I believe that it is very late. Great damage has already been done. Is it too late? Is it still possible to reverse direction? Could responsible leadership in Washington, Jerusalem, and Ramallah force a change, giving us a peaceful Israel behind safe borders, one not consumed by Holocaust-driven fears and not playing into and intensifying the hatred by which it is surrounded? I have to believe that time has not yet run out, but that belief gets harder to maintain, day by day. Meanwhile, I see Israel, the state and the society, as the great collective accomplishment of the Jewish people in the twentieth century. Its astounding success—material, cultural, scientific, and in several other realms—reflects the tremendous strengths and resources that are our people’s legacy. But the essential moral failing of Israel—its inability to deal fairly with the rights and even the full humanity of the other people with whom it shares a homeland—remains deeply troubling. Whether this inability was caused by the intransigence of the other side; whether it was fueled by memory and fear left over from the Holocaust; or whether it was the predictable legacy of Jewry as an ancient covenantal community that never cared enough about the lives of those who stood outside it—only history will be able to judge.

AMERICAN JEWS REFLECT ON  
WHY ISRAEL MATTERS TO THEM

A  
DREAM  
OF  
ZION



Edited by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin



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*A Dream of Zion:  
American Jews Reflect on Why Israel Matters to Them*

2007 First Printing  
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Pages 261–266 constitute a continuation of this copyright page.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A dream of Zion : American Jews reflect on why Israel matters to them / edited by Jeffrey K. Salkin.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-58023-340-8 (hardcover)

ISBN-10: 1-58023-340-6 (hardcover)

1. Israel and the diaspora. 2. Jews—United States—Identity. 3. Jews—United States—Attitudes. 4. Jews—Attitudes toward Israel. 5. Jews—Public opinion. 6. Public opinion—United States. I. Salkin, Jeffrey K., 1954—

DS132.D74 2007

956.94—dc22

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

2007028851

Jacket design: Jenny Buono

Jacket art: *Jerusalem Sunrise* (© 2005) was created by Michael Bogdanow, an artist, lawyer, author, and musician living in Lexington, Massachusetts. It is a contemporary “Mizrach” (Hebrew for east) and represents our looking east to Jerusalem and to Israel. The original is in the collection of Temple Ner Tamid in Bloomfield, New Jersey. The artist’s contemporary, spiritual works of art inspired by Judaic texts can be seen on [www.MichaelBogdanow.com](http://www.MichaelBogdanow.com).

Manufactured in the United States of America

♻️ Printed on recycled paper.

Published by Jewish Lights Publishing

A Division of LongHill Partners, Inc.

Sunset Farm Offices, Route 4, P.O. Box 237

Woodstock, VT 05091

Tel: (802) 457-4000

Fax: (802) 457-4004

[www.jewishlights.com](http://www.jewishlights.com)

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