

# Reclaiming Israel's Hybrid Character

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## COMMENTARY

Israelis from all walks of life believe that the Oct. 7 massacres changed something vital in them and in their country. The horrors of the recent past weigh on citizens' hearts and minds. Daunting ongoing military operations in the south with Iranian-backed Hamas and in the north with Iranian-backed Hezbollah – along with the threat of intensifying fighting in both arenas as well as of battles to come elsewhere in the region amid Israel's multi-front war with Iran – stir anxieties and fray nerves. And, keenly aware of the nation's bitter internal divisions, the resurgence of antisemitism in the West, faltering international support, and deteriorating relations with the United States, Israelis fear for their nation's future.

At the same time, post-Oct. 7 Israelis have demonstrated abiding pride in their country and have exhibited remarkable resilience in the face of mass atrocities the likes of which no nation under assault has ever before witnessed broadcast in real time on its television screens and smart phones. Within days of the jihadists' invasion, more than 300,000 reservists in a country of 9.3 million people reported for duty. Citizens of every description volunteered – to prepare and deliver meals for the swollen military ranks; to care for grieving families whose loved ones had been butchered or kidnapped; to provide mental health and educational services for hundreds of thousands of displaced residents along the southern and northern borders who had been relocated to hotels around the country; and to pick fruits and vegetables in neglected fields and orchards. Israelis discovered following the Oct. 7 savagery a unity of purpose and dedication to the common good of which many in the Jewish state had not known they were still capable.

Plunged into a war widely seen in the country as posing an existential threat and occupied with countless acts of sacrifice, courage, and devotion, Israelis have had little opportunity to step back to consider the big picture. They have scarcely begun to delve into the origins of their post-Oct. 7 plight or explore the sources of their heroism. Until, that is, the Hebrew-language publication last week of "[The Eighth Day: Israel After October 7<sup>th</sup>](#)" by Micah Goodman.

Goodman's new book aims to assist fellow Israelis who share his apprehension and perplexity. Extraordinary for its swift composition and publication, multi-layered and pinpoint analysis, and wise counsel in a dark hour, the book illuminates the collision of forces that brought the nation to the "apocalypse" of Oct. 7 and brings into focus resources within the Israeli character and the Jewish tradition for revitalizing the Jewish state. Already underway,

an English translation will help apprehensive and perplexed friends of Israel around the world to understand better the depths of the Jewish state's distress and the wellsprings of its renewal.

A fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Goodman has published six Israeli bestsellers on an impressive range of subjects: Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, Moses, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the mutual antipathy and the mutual dependence in Israel of the religious and the secular, and the digital revolution and Israeli political polarization. His books display a rare gift for expressing in clear and concise language trenchant distinctions, essential tensions, arresting paradoxes, and sustaining syntheses.

"The Eighth Day" uses that gift to clarify Israel's "hybrid character," the reclaiming of which, Goodman contends, is crucial not only to the nations' flourishing but to its survival. As memorialized in its Declaration of Independence, Israel was born a Jewish, rights-protecting, and democratic country. And so it must remain, argues Goodman. Rooted in the modern tradition of freedom, which embraces equality of rights under law, self-fulfillment, and the diversity of ways of being human, Israel is also grounded in an ancient tradition – religious and national – that stresses family, community, and peoplehood.

On Oct. 7, jihadists stormed across Israel's border with Gaza to inflict evils of a kind that Jews had suffered during two millennia of exile and dispersion and which Israel's founding was meant to end. The disaster confronted Israelis with a shattering discovery – or rediscovery: Notwithstanding the last 20 years of unprecedented growth and prosperity, they live in a dangerous neighborhood in which their existence is fragile and their survival is not guaranteed.

The invasion and the slaughter, according to Goodman, overturned two essential achievements of Zionism: the separation of Jews in time from a past of weakness and persecution, and the separation of Jews in place from homelessness and lack of sovereign control over their homes and land. Oct. 7's devastating implication was that even with political power Jews remain vulnerable to pogroms.

The catastrophe, however, did not refute Zionism. A tragic view of the world, inscribed in biblical faith, was familiar to Zionism's founding fathers. The refounding of their nation to which he summons Israelis represents, for Goodman, a return to and deepening of Zionism.

Goodman finds a key to "Israel's hidden architecture" in the relation between the argument over judicial reform – which quickly deteriorated into an ugly dispute over the shape of the regime and the character of the Jewish state – that roiled the nation from Jan. 4, 2023, to Oct. 6, 2023, and the Oct. 7 outbreak of war. The vehement debate over the proposed judicial-system overhaul weakened Israel by heightening the sense among the contending camps that the goal of politics was to crush the other side. The erosion of Israel's readiness to defend itself put on agonizing display by Oct. 7 – the intelligence community failed to

provide adequate warning, the security barrier did not impede the terrorists, and troops were elsewhere and took too long to arrive – demonstrated that Israeli political unity is not some distant, discretionary goal but rather the very basis of Jewish perdurance in the Jewish people's ancient homeland.

Certainty abetted laxity and disunity. Israel's intelligence community diminished the country's security by treating as settled that Israel had no cause for concern about a major Hamas attack. Similarly, the contending political camps – Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government and the opposition – damaged the nation's civic cohesion by deeming their own political priorities as irrefragable and the other side's as irremediable.

To arrest the "virus of polarization" and restore unity, argues Goodman, Israelis must embrace "the healing power of doubt." This will involve a reorientation – moral, political, and intellectual – that derives support from the Jewish tradition, classical political philosophy, and the modern tradition of freedom. "The ability of human beings to hold opinions but not too strongly is not only a condition for a flourishing intellectual life," he writes, "but also a united and durable Israeli life." Learning to recognize the limits of one's own understanding and to appreciate the truth – doubtless partial and incomplete – in others' opinions facilitates and is facilitated by a politics of "wide agreement." Sharing the fundamental belief that Israel must remain Jewish, free, and democratic, for example, enables and is enabled by a robust exchange of opinions about the particulars of law and public policy that harmonizes these sometimes-opposing principles.

Such a reorientation would reflect an actual shift in political attitudes in Israel that has not yet translated into a political realignment. For decades, Goodman observes, the chief political battle line – indeed, the identity-defining issue – has been the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The right sought to preserve Israeli control over the bulk of Judea and Samaria. The left aspired to make substantial territorial concessions for peace. But since the Second Intifada (2000-2005), the disagreement over Judea and Samaria has faded: Many on the right abandoned the dream of exercising sovereignty over most of Judea and Samaria, home today to some 2.5-3 million Palestinians, while many on the left lost confidence that substantial territorial compromise will bring peace.

This reconfiguration of opinions presents an opportunity for a political realignment, the crystallization of a new majority encompassing elements of the right, left, and center that recognizes that preserving Israel's hybrid character as a nation that is both a rights-protecting democracy and a Jewish state is not a luxury but a necessity. Goodman finds a nonpolitical model for this political realignment in the Israeli Defense Forces and particularly in the IDF reservists who unhesitatingly responded to the call of duty on Oct. 7 and have defended the nation since.

The IDF's combination of physical might and inner strength, maintains Goodman, exhibits Israel's hybrid character. The IDF's physical might springs from the modern tradition of freedom, which fosters entrepreneurship and innovation, whose fruits transformed Israel's military into a marvel of high-tech capabilities. IDF troops' inner strength – the disposition of right, left, and center in the regular military as well as in the reserves to put aside political grievances and risk their lives side-by-side to defend their nation – reflects traditional virtues nourished by the Jewish tradition, which situates individuals within families, communities, and the nation and imposes responsibilities and duties beyond private desire and personal ambition.

Reweaving the competing yet fundamental elements of the national spirit so that, as in the IDF, so too in Israeli social and political life, they operate to unify the nation would represent a vital post-Oct. 7 change. A rewoven unity would mark a bracing victory not only for Israelis but also for the Jewish people and for friends of freedom everywhere.

*Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at [PeterBerkowitz.com](https://peterberkowitz.com) and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.*