

“texts” — be they in the forms of books, conversations, or rituals — speaks to a far larger audience than a specific theme or issue. We should not think that Talmud Torah, that is, the study of text is value-neutral. The move from historical appeals for Judaism to hermeneutical ones will not interest anyone if it is

a bland, relativistic approach that validates everything and clarifies nothing. Rather, we need a passionate articulation of a Jewish mode of considering the world. The new locus of Jewish identity, then, must not be an historical event or a political entity but, rather, the value of Talmud Torah. 

Preparing for the Pains of Peace

Keith Kahn-Harris

EVERYONE WHO CARES about Israel has their own dream about what happens when the guns fall silent. Thinking about what should follow the endless anguish of war is essential if we are to feel that the conflict has any purpose. Yet in the gaps between our dreams and the current reality, it becomes apparent just how hard it is to end a situation seemingly so entrenched. But more important, we are also forced to recognize that one person’s dream of a post-conflict Israel is another’s nightmare.

Everyone’s vision for Israel involves somebody losing, whether that vision entails an equitable two-state solution, a Palestinian entity with limited autonomy, a theocracy on both sides of the Jordan, a Palestinian-free state, a Jew-free state. The losers, whomever they may be, are unlikely to shrivel up and disappear immediately, and this seems to imply — in the best case scenario — some kind of continuing low-grade conflict for a considerable time.

Even if the Israel-Palestinian conflict could be solved to the satisfaction of all parties, this would not eliminate all forms of conflict in Israel. There are endemic problems between, to name but a few: secular and religious Jews, rich and poor, Ashkenazi and Mizrachi, Israeli Arabs and Jews, Arab Christians and Muslims. Perhaps with the larger conflict out of the way, the country would be engulfed in a series of smaller, but still potentially violent conflicts. Post-conflict Israel also faces another threat — normality. From its inception, Zionism was split between the desire to see Israel as a “state like any other,” complete with Jewish police and prostitutes and the desire for Israel to be different, a “light unto the nations.” And there is no cure for life; even without conflict, that future will only be somewhat less difficult than the present.

Any worthwhile vision for a post-conflict Israel has to be a vision for *now*. This is where

pre-state Zionism provides inspiration. From the first *aliyah* until independence, those who built Israel did not just build kibbutzim and the Haganah, they built schools, universities, cafes, and opera houses. They built all the basic elements of “the good life” in a land where simple existence was a perilous affair. This is the gift that the early Zionists — for all their mistakes — bequeathed to today’s Israel. The gift ensured that life in Israel was not simply reducible to the conflict. Israeli art, culture, and everyday life does not *only* reflect Israel’s many conflicts. Life in Israel today is full, vibrant, and culturally creative. It is worth living *now*, and thus it will be worth living post-conflict.

The raw materials for a post-conflict Israel are already in place: a lively press, a thriving arts scene, a vigorous youth culture, and intellectually dynamic universities. The key task is to keep them viable, ensuring that they are not snuffed out in the quest for simple survival. It also means avoiding the opposite problem of turning Israeli culture into a kind of escape route from reality. There are worrying signs that, for example, secular Israeli youth’s seemingly insatiable desire for clubbing stems in part from a desire to run away from the difficulties of life in Israel. Of course culture has to have some kind of distance from everyday life, but too much distance and it becomes escapism.

I can easily imagine my ideal vision of a post-conflict Israel. It actually looks similar to my current experience of Israel — the incessant debate, the street life, the bewildering diversity, the vitality that streams out of the country’s every pore. The difference is that in a post-conflict Israel these aspects of Israeli society would not be overwhelmed by the crushing weight of existential threat. Rather, Israeli life would have space to develop into “the good life.” 

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