

Catch-67 *

The ideas behind the debate tearing Israel apart

Micah Goodman

Scholar in Residence at Temple Emanuel – December 2-3, 2017

* (an excerpt from June 11, 2017 Draft)

Introduction

On the eve of the Six-Day War, Israel formed a unity government for the first time in its history. Not only was the government united: the whole of Israeli society united in the face of such dramatic threats, as a profound sense of solidarity spread between Jews across the country and the entire world. This unity formed the backdrop for the greatest victory in Israel's history. In only six days of war, the IDF defeated three Arab armies and tripled the size of the country.

Yet the conquest of these territories ignited a painful debate within Israel itself: should these new territories be settled with Jews, or should they be relinquished to the Arabs instead in exchange for peace? Those who dreamt of keeping the Land of Israel united clashed with those who dreamt of keeping it at peace, and they tore Israeli society into two competing camps. The powerful sense of unity that dominated the eve of the war collapsed, in the end, because of the results of that very same war.

Much has changed since then in the relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs who live in the territories conquered in that war. We have suffered the outbreak of two intifadas, among other crises, as well as three major rounds of violence in the Gaza Strip. We have endured the fateful years that followed the Oslo Accords, the years of disengagement from Gaza and of repeated attempts to broker a permanent peace between the two sides. Not a single round of war secured victory, and not a single round of talks secured peace. But while these fruitless efforts to win victory or peace raged on, an equally endless argument raged within Israel itself over where to draw the country's borders.

The territories conquered in just six days of conflict sparked a debate that has endured for fifty years.

Jewish tradition treats the fiftieth year as a jubilee: every fifty years, slaves are liberated from their masters, all debts forgiven, and all lands returned to their former owners. The jubilee is the moment when the clocks are reset. Any socio-economic gaps formed over the last fifty years are eliminated, and all distinctions of status between master and slave are wiped away. After fifty years, it is as if the world is created anew.

The jubilee year of the Six-Day War is an opportunity for us to reset this internal argument and create our discourse anew. The different opinions expressed and arguments aired over the last fifty years have left both Israeli and Palestinian societies at a dead end. In Biblical times, the fiftieth year was an opportunity for Jewish renewal, a chance to re-examine the basic assumptions of political thought in ancient Israel. But as a psychological precondition for reconfiguring our ways of thinking, we must first adopt a radical change in our emotional relationship with those ways of thinking.

The Emotional Relationship with Our Opinions

The temptations of consumerism offer an endless distraction in the modern world and can shape one's very identity. Citizens in a consumer society tend to develop emotional and even intimate relationships with their possessions. In the most extreme cases of materialism, people

regard their possessions as parts of who they are, and not just as things they own.

Extreme materialism is similar to extreme idealism. Idealists struggle to differentiate themselves from their ideas. Their worldviews are not just collections of ideas but an integral part of their identity. Idealists identify with their ideas just as materialists identify with their possessions. Whoever assimilates their opinions into their identity becomes closed to any criticism about those opinions. As they see it, any objection to their views is an assault on their existence.

Israel today is flooded with competing ideas. Israelis express a wide range of opinions on such matters as the economy and society, and religion and state, and the clashes between these ideas provoke lively and even stormy debate. Nevertheless, Israelis have absorbed their viewpoints into their very identity on one topic alone—the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Israelis' opinions on the environment or on interest rates play a part in how they think. In contrast, their opinions on where to locate Israel's eastern border form a part of *who they are*. One who believes in withdrawing to the lines of 4 June 1967 is a leftist. One who believes in settling the disputed territories is on the right. In other words, in contrast to other political opinions, these positions shape not only how Israelis define the world, but how they define themselves.

To object to an Israeli's position on the conflict is to object to their core identity. Therein lies the paradox: on the issue that matters to them the most, Israelis are capable of listening to one another the least.

The Israeli right believes that the ideas of the left are not just wrong, but dangerous: a withdrawal from the mountains of Judea and Samaria would leave Israel shrunken, weakened, vulnerable, and doomed to physical destruction. The Israeli left believes that the ideas of the right are not just wrong, but dangerous: a continued military and civilian presence in the disputed territories would leave Israel morally dilapidated, internationally isolated, and doomed to demographic destruction.

The right sees the left exactly as the left sees the right. The right is convinced that the left's vision will cause Israel's total collapse, and the left is convinced that the right's vision will cause Israel's total collapse. How can one possibly listen to a fellow citizen whose vision spells disaster for the entire country?

In Israel, the conversation about borders is unique among political arguments because of these two features: our opinions form a part of our identity, and others' opinions threaten our existence. The combination of these two characteristics has prevented any possibility of listening and has caused the total collapse of Israeli political dialogue.

Israelis do not discuss the conflict as a brainstorming exercise to provoke original thinking, challenge preconceptions, or nurture new and creative ideas. Israeli political discourse is not so much a space to exchange ideas as a platform to affirm identities. The fiery tone of the debate has led to ideological fixation and intellectual rigidity—a clearly disturbing result. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a complicated subject, but the way we think about it is not complicated at all. What remains is a stark asymmetry between the profound depth of this complex problem, and the shallow simplicity of the thinking it provokes.

The fiftieth year of this seemingly endless conversation grants us the opportunity to finally start over afresh—but only if we have the courage to detach our opinions from our identities.