Israel: An Outpost of the West in the Middle East?

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Having flown here from Israel via California I feel somewhat like that famous English Lord who was dreaming at night that he was giving a speech in the House of Lords and woke up to discover that he was, in fact, doing just that. Be that as it may, I will try to tackle the question posed to this panel to the best of my jetlagged abilities. Namely: Is Israel an outpost of the West in the Middle East?

The short answer to this question is an almost unqualified “Yes!” Israel is – broadly speaking – a Western State and a Western Society, and yes, it is “an outpost” – a distinct outlier in the Middle East – a region of the world that has, again broadly speaking, proven to be perhaps singularly resistant to all but the most superficial manifestations of Western culture and Western institutions. A region of the world which may now, indeed, be moving further away from Western culture and Western institutions.

So that is the short answer. But even a sleep deprived English Lord would be expected to offer a little more than a simple “Yes!” to this question, let alone a verbose Israeli chutzpadik who has been flown here at the expense of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Accordingly, let me delve a little further and ask: What is the West? And how does Israel measure in relation to the West in terms of its core values, institutions or civilizational characteristics?

In approaching these questions I would first like to shamelessly borrow three essential insights about “the West” from the very-much-still-alive-and-kicking French economist and philosopher, Philippe Nemo:

First, that the term “The West” is still meaningful in the 21st century. That it has not been made redundant as the result of failure, universalization, or some conceptual over-stretch. This is not a trivial or uncontroversial assertion, and it carries two main consequences. One, that “the West” does possess a core unity, a set of values and institutional traits, that are both deeper than its inner geopolitical divisions (deeper than American-European squabbles for example)
and two, that those values and institutional traits are distinguishable – for the time being at least – from the African, Chinese, and indeed Arab worlds. Both of these assumptions are essentially true – or at least we have deep vested interests in maintaining their validity.

Second, Philippe Nemo rightly observes that “the West” represents the cumulative, time-tested patrimony of values and instructions developed over millennia. “The West”, in other words, is essentially a set of cultural and institutional traits which has historically been successively embodied in several human communities and forged by successive time-place evolutions and revolutions – from Ancient Greece and Ancient Israel to Rome; from the Papal Reforms of the 11th to 13th centuries, through the Dutch, English, French and American Revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries; all the way to the rise of modern democracies and the construction of the Wilsonian, Liberal International Order, under American leadership in the aftermath of the cataclysmic horrors of the first and second world wars.

This means that “The West” is not locatable in a single time or place – it is not imbued in any one nation or people. Modern western civilization, rather, is a synthesis of Athens, Rome, Jerusalem and, most recently, Washington DC. The self-constituting epicenter of “The West” has shifted in the past, and may well shift again, perhaps back to Jerusalem this time, perhaps elsewhere.

And thirdly, like Nemo and others, when looking at the genesis and evolution of “The West” I find myself repeatedly struck by its miraculous nature – by the miracle of its coming into being; by its uncanny durability and capacity for revolutionary leaps forward; by the miraculous scientific, economic, security and political benefits it has brought humanity, despite its faults – but also by its fragility and vulnerability.

This point is worth lingering on for a moment if only because it is so relevant to the news coming out of Ukraine and, I would say broader deeper international trends of direct relevance to the US, Germany and Israel.

The combination – the simultaneous miracle and fragility of the West; the simultaneous value and vulnerability of the West – carries at least two important consequences. It means that the West both deserves to be maintained and, if
necessary, defended and that – like the spirit of science, economic and political liberty more broadly – that the West requires constant vigilance and nurturing (to paraphrase Thomas Jefferson) to ensure its preservation and continued development.

Ironically perhaps, it was the two colossal traumas of the 20th century – those of fascist and communist totalitarianisms – that spurred the West to both become truly aware of its value and vulnerability as a civilization, and to mobilize its greatest spiritual and material resources to defeat those totalitarianisms.

Ironically, again, in the early part of the 21st century, it is the apparent inability, or at least recalcitrance of the triumphant – some would say smug and lazy West – to acknowledge and confront the dangers posed to it by new totalitarian challengers – most notably Iran, Global Salafi Jihadism, and a resurgent authoritarian Russia – that are undermining its own values and increasing its own vulnerability.

Before getting to present day dilemmas, and present-day Israel, let me say something at least about the place of ancient Israel and Judaism in the story of the West. In the time I have this will necessarily be a sketch, but it would help us better identify what “the West” actually is and how modern Israel fits into it:

In ancient Greece we find the foundations of the ideas of government by law, individual equality and liberty, critical reasoning and scientific inquiry. Rome developed Greek ideas about the Rule of Law into an unprecedented, elaborate system of private law which gave us the social and institutional recognition of individual rights, personal liberties, and rules about the acquisition, transfer and protection of property by law.

Ancient Israel generated comparable ideas that were to become essential Western values – for example the idea that human beings were endowed with fundamental dignity, and therefore rights, because they were created B’Tselem Elohim (in the image of G-D) – but Jerusalem also contributed four fundamental pillars to the evolving edifice of the West.

First, in the Hebrew Bible and Hebraic political traditions we find the birth of the idea that “temporal” power – i.e. earthly, political or state power – can be
legitimately distinguished and divided from “spiritual”, divine or religious power. It was the Bible – with its division of power between prophets, judges, and kings – that started the Western tradition of a deep and creative tension between spiritual and temporal authority.

This notion – that legitimate authority can be divided and that different centers of authority can co-exist with one another – represented a revolutionary departure from the closed-order societies of the ancient world and is really the bedrock of political pluralism. It is also perhaps the single most important dimension lacking in Islamic and tribal political thinking to this very day.

Second, Judaism (and later the Judeo-Christian ethic) invented the idea of human progress – the idea that the nature of the world is not fixed; that the old order is not an eternal given; that evil and suffering are not inevitable conditions to be passively endured; and that to try to change the world was not necessarily Hybris as the Greeks thought. Quite the opposite. The Judeo-Christian revolution insisted that human reality can, and must, be actively shaped through human agency and by ethically guided human action in this world in order to create a better world.

Indeed, it is doubtful that the concept of human beings seeking to intentionally change their existential reality existed before the emergence of Judaism, with its notions of Tzedaka and Tikun Olam. This, I believe, was and remains an essential characteristic of Jewish ontology and its spirit very much animates contemporary Israel.

The word “Israel” itself – the name given to Jacob after his nightly wrestling match with the Angel of G-D - means quite literally “wrestling with G-D”, struggling with G-D to be an active partner in the continuous act of creation. The same idea underlies the best (non Halahik) answer to the question “Who is a Jew?” that I have heard: “Who is a Jew?” A Jew is someone who always reads a book with a pencil in his hand so he can make side notes in the book and so change it.
The third pillar introduced by early Judaism and adopted by Christianity is a radical metamorphosis of the concept of time. As part and parcel of the idea of human progress, time becomes a forward-looking notion. Human time, and therefore human history has a beginning (creation) and is heading towards “the end of time”. This means that history has meaning, it has a purpose – and that we as humans have a purpose within it. We become actors within history and it becomes our essence, our purpose, to act within history. The consequence of Biblical eschatology is that the time human beings have on earth is singular (there is no cyclical time) and it becomes a time of urgency. Anyone who has ever walked the streets of Tel-Aviv or Jerusalem will know exactly what that looks like.

Lastly, with Biblical eschatology and the idea of progress come notions of Messianism and Utopianism. These have sometime taken violent and destructive forms, and still do, but in their best modern forms they act an ethical magnet pulling humanity forward - helping reinforce belief in historical purpose, human agency, and the active construction of a better world through scientific progress, economic development and the spread of liberty.

The next two miraculous leap forwards of the West are more familiar. The first concerns the spread of liberal democratic reforms, the flourishing of critical pluralism and modern scientific research, and the rise of economic liberalism, particularly in the period between 1789 and 1920.

Here too Hebraic political thought, Jewish communities (notably in Germany and Austria) and individual Jews played important and intricate roles in the construction of the West. In this context I am reminded of Michal Novak’s excellent book, On Two Wings, documenting the critical and multi-faceted contribution of the Hebrew Bible to the founding ideas of the United States in particular. In fact, Novak shows that the Hebrew Bible is quoted by the Founding Fathers of the United States more than any other source.

The latest miraculous leap forward of the West comes in the aftermath of the Second World War and involves the construction of what John Ikenberry has called the Liberal International Order – an order built not only on the tragic lessons of the War and The Holocaust, but on the Wilsonian principles of
democratic peace, international institutions and international law, under American leadership.

This is where the story of the newly born State of Israel merges with the broader story of the post-War West. It is, generally speaking, a story of remarkable Israeli political, technological, and more recently economic success – enabled by the incubation Israel enjoyed within an international system dominated by the West incubation, in the Cold War and Post-Cold War period.

Israel was reborn and has thrived under conditions of unprecedented Western political, economic, and military dominance. Whether the State of Israel would have come into being, whether it would have survived had this not been the case is questionable.

At the same time, the conditions of adversity into which Israel was born – and in particular its existential need to ensure high degrees of domestic political legitimacy, economic growth, and military superiority (which is to say technological superiority) – have made Israel, in some key respects at least, a Hyper-Western country. Israel has survived and thrived largely because it adopted Western political, scientific and, especially since the mid-1980s economic institutions and policies.

Israel is a young country, but having been a liberal democracy since its independence in 1948 (when there were only 18 democracies on the face of the planet) it is in fact on of the oldest democracies in the world. In 60 years, from a largely agrarian economy with a GDP per capita similar to that of Ethiopia, it has become an OECD Member State with a GDP per capita exceeding $30,000. If Israel was a member of the EU today it would be a net contributor to the EU budget. And Israel is now a medium size country, a demographically growing country set to cross the 10 million inhabitants in the next 15 years.

Still, in Europe and in parts of the U.S. there are many who do not accept Israel as fully part of the West. Why? Let me end by noting three main reasons, perhaps not the only ones, but hopefully food for further discussion.

The first is simply prevailing ignorance, leading to discomfort, about the notion of Israel being a “Jewish State”. There is a deep popular misunderstanding of
nature of Jewishness in this regard, one that erroneously views Judaism as primarily a religion and therefore erroneously equates the notion of “Jewish State” with its Christian or Islamic (non)equivalents. The fear then is that a “Jewish State” cannot be fully democratic or that it might, by definition, be insensitive to minority rights. Neither of these assumptions is necessarily correct.

Second, there are many observers, especially in Europe, who lament the relative demise of the old Israeli, European-Ashkenazi elite, and the rise of a more varied, more Sabra-Sephardic, less European one. The sense that Israel is becoming “less European” is backed up by genuine changes within Israeli society, yet the relationship between that socio-cultural change, on the one hand, and Israel’s “Westernness”, on the other hand, is more complex and nuanced than is typically portrait in circles concerned with this issue. True, demographically Israel is influenced by a growing ultra-orthodox Jewish and, to a lesser but still significant degree, Israeli Arab population. Yet here too demographic change is nuanced, its effects varied, and the shift does not amount to a zero-sum loss of “westernness”. Indeed, the capacity of Israeli society to socialize fringe populations into a modern, essentially western collective should not be underestimated, just as the preservation of Israel’s key western features into the far future is not inevitable and ought not be taken for granted.

Finally, Israel is sometimes perceived to be an odd bird in the western flock because of the continued Arab animus toward it, the unresolved nature of its conflict with the Palestinians, and the fact that it still deploys military force – something which most, though not all, western states have all but forgotten how to do. There is more than a little irony intertwined in the notion that Israel is somehow “less western” because it exists in a state of conflict with anti-western states (Iran), non-state armed groups (Hezbollah, Hamas) and movements (Salafist jihadi networks, Muslim Brotherhood). Western identity used to be at least partially defined by the willingness of western states to defend, by force if necessary, western interests and values. The fact that Israel increasingly finds itself alone in its willingness to do so does not mean that Israel has somehow distanced itself from the West, but that other Western states have become estranged from their own Western spirit.

The People of Israel and, more recently, the modern State of Israel have been an integral, constitutive part of the miraculous story of the West for millennia.
Modern Israel’s own future depends on it preserving, indeed deepening, its own Western values and institutions internally, and on it contributing to the vitality and innovation of the West through scientific research, successful management of political and religious questions, and – where necessary – the defense of Western principles and assets. The need for this triangular conversation has never been so timely and important.

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