Israel’s dreams and nightmares: Author Yossi Klein Halevi

an interview by David Heim in the September 30, 2015 issue

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An Israeli journalist, born in Brooklyn, Yossi Klein Halevi is senior fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a research and educational center in Jerusalem. He is co-director, with Abdullah Antepli of Duke University, of the institute’s Muslim Leadership Initiative. He is the author of At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew’s Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land *(2001). His book* Like Dreamers: The Story of the Israeli Paratroopers Who Reunited Jerusalem and Divided a Nation *was named the 2013 Jewish Book of the Year by the Jewish Book Council.*

In *Like Dreamers* you display the sharp divide that emerged in Israel after 1967 between messianic religious believers and secularists, and between the religiously motivated settlement movement and the peace movement, as well as various religious and political positions in between. In tracking individual histories over 50 years, did you find anything that surprised you or made you think differently about Israel?

I worked on *Like Dreamers* for 11 years, and one of the reasons it took so long was that I only gradually understood what it was about. It began as an account of the left-right divide that opened as a result of the Six-Day War, and I used the paratroopers who had fought in the battle for Jerusalem as the device to tell that

story. But then I realized that there was a deeper story: the shift from the Israel that was represented by the socialist communal kibbutz movement to the Israel that was represented by the West Bank settlement movement.

What connects the kibbutz and the settlements was that both were expressions—in radically different ways—of the utopian or messianic impulse. The socialist kibbutzniks believed that Israel would be the laboratory for democratic communism. The settlers believed that the return home of the Jews would be the trigger for the messianic era.

So the book presents a way of understanding Israel's story through the fate of these vast dreams of world redemption. I realized that the longing for redemption was in some way at the heart of the Israeli story. Seen that way, the struggle between left and right in Israel is a struggle between rival visions of redemption. Israel's story is, in part, the story of what happened to those vast dreams when they encountered reality.

One divide that emerged after 1967 is between those who see Israel's military victory in the Six-Day War as a divine act, or at least one with great religious meaning, and those who view it more pragmatically as a military victory that presented both possibilities and dangers. You write with sympathy for both points of views. As an Israeli, how do you negotiate that issue?

The Six-Day War was a moment of profound healing for the Jewish people. Many of us feared that another holocaust was about to happen, this time in Israel. Instead we won the greatest military victory in Jewish history. Many Jews responded by thinking: if it was fair to blame God for his silence during the Holocaust, it was only fair to acknowledge his miraculous deliverance now. My father, a Holocaust survivor, put it this way: Now I can forgive God. Many young secular Jews began observing Judaism.

But even a miracle doesn't absolve us of assessing its consequences. The first consequence of the Six-Day War was that the destruction of Israel was averted. The second consequence was that Israel became an occupier of another people. No one planned it, no one wanted that to happen. But it did. And so at the end of the day I find myself in the camp of the pragmatists who believe in dividing this land between Israelis and Palestinians.

Peace plans call for the removal of at least some major Jewish settlements in the occupied territory to allow for the creation of a Palestinian state. Do you think Israel has the political will to do it?

As an Israeli who believes in partitioning this land, I accept the necessity of evacuating settlements. But I will experience the forced evacuation of my fellow Israelis from their homes—many of whom were born into those homes—as a historic trauma, and the separation from places like Hebron as a kind of amputation. I love Tel Aviv, but by the measure of Jewish history and the Middle East, it's a baby city, barely a century old. Hebron holds 4,000 years of Jewish history.

A majority of Israelis have consistently told pollsters that they're ready for a two-state solution. The only consideration for Israeli pragmatists is that the Palestinian state be a peaceful neighbor and genuinely recognize the Jewish people's right to a sovereign state in the Middle East. There are 21 Arab states and 56 Muslim states; the existence of one Jewish majority state in this world is an act of justice. Not, of course, at the expense of another people.

If the Palestinian leadership convinced us that a land-for-peace deal would really result in peace, we would find the will to dismantle settlements.

What would it take to persuade Israelis to sign on to such a deal—and what would persuade you? What are the main barriers to that happening?

For me, the main barrier is the deeply held belief of Palestinians that all of historical justice is on their side, and that the Jews are strangers who have invented a historical connection with the land of Israel/Palestine.

I follow the Palestinian media, and that's the message that one generation after another of Palestinians is raised on. And this message comes not only from the Islamist media but also from the Palestinian Authority: the Jews are liars and thieves who aren't even a real people. We've invented our history. There was no ancient Jewish presence in the land of Israel, no temple on the Temple Mount, no Holocaust. My entire being is a lie.

This deeply rooted denial of Jewish legitimacy is rife not only in Palestinian society but throughout the Middle East. It's astonishing to me that the international community gives this Jew-hatred a pass, as though it had no impact on peace.

The Arab world generally (and some Western Christians too) need to come to terms with the fact that the Jews are a people with a religious identity, that there is no Judaism without the Jewish people, and that Judaism works a little differently than the other monotheistic faiths by grounding its being in a specific people attached to a specific land.

When I see at least the beginning of a Palestinian attempt to come to terms with our right to define ourselves as a people, I'll begin to force myself to lower my guard and take a chance.

You are well acquainted with the constraints imposed on Palestinians—the checkpoints and the limits on travel, work, and political participation. What would you as an Israeli say to the ordinary Palestinian who simply seeks to be a citizen of his own "normal" country?

First: I'm sorry. I'm sorry that my side didn't have the wisdom to avoid the temptation of reclaiming land we regard as part of our historical patrimony but which we should have left alone. I'm sorry that you've lived your life under occupation. I'm sorry for all the wasted energies that have gone into this conflict. I'm sorry for the shattering of your people. My people didn't return home with the intent of displacing another people, but that is what happened as a result of the conflict between us. I will support whatever we need to do to try to make this right—short of creating a new injustice that would threaten my people's safety, our homecoming.

But I also need to say this: At every crucial moment when there was a credible offer on the table, the mainstream of the Zionist movement and of Israeli society said yes to territorial compromise, while the leadership of the Palestinian national movement said no or else said nothing.

I desperately want to end this occupation, which is destroying each side in different ways. But I need some assurance from Palestinian leaders that we're not being tricked, that the day after I withdraw from the West Bank, missiles won't start falling on Tel Aviv, that if we redivide Jerusalem, Hamas won't take over. The region around us is on fire; I can't afford to risk such chaos overtaking my society.

In regard to the prospect of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons, it seems there are two options: a military strike, probably by Israel, that destroys Iran's nuclear facilities or a negotiated deal that appeals to Iran's economic self-interest. Both routes present enormous short-term and long-

term risks. President Obama, along with other world leaders, has chosen the second path. Is there any other alternative?

The Iranian regime has two goals: to become the regional hegemon and to attain nuclear weapons. By releasing tens of billions of dollars in frozen assets and by enabling much more in business revenues, this deal has brought the regime closer to its first goal. And by leaving it as a nuclear threshold state, the deal has positioned Iran for an eventual breakout. That's not just Prime Minister Netanyahu's argument; almost the entire Israeli political spectrum sees this deal as a historic disaster. So do Arab leaders.

Theologian Hans Küng once said: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions." In *At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden*, you explored peace among the religions in Israel/Palestine. What's your current assessment of resources for peace and dialogue among Muslims, Jews, and Christians of the region?

Dialogue efforts continue, even if low key, and they are essential. In the Middle East, peace efforts require religious input to win legitimacy on both sides. One of the reasons that the peace process has failed is that it didn't have a religious sensibility. The peace was being negotiated by secular elites who lacked the religious language of so many of their own people.

But the question is: What kind of religious efforts? There is doing good and do-gooding. Doing good is nurturing those people-to-people efforts that still persist, despite everything. Do-gooding is putting all the blame on one side, demonizing one side, rather than relating to the conflict as a tragedy of two traumatized peoples, each with ample reason to fear for its future.

On the basis of my research for *Like Dreamers*, I can say unequivocally that isolating Israel has the opposite effect of what the boycotters intend. In the past, when Israelis sensed that the international community was being fair toward Israel, they were more forthcoming in supporting peace initiatives. But when they felt that Israel was being unfairly judged and condemned, they turned right.

I'll give two examples. The Oslo peace process, which began in 1993 as an Israeli initiative, happened after the fall of the Soviet Union, which led many nations in Eastern Europe and the Third World to establish diplomatic relations with the Jewish

state. Israelis no longer felt isolated and so concluded that they could take risks for peace.

The opposite process happened in November 1975, when the United Nations, at the instigation of the Soviet Union, voted to label Zionism a form of racism. That resolution was rescinded by the UN after the fall of the Soviet Union, but the damage was done. Israelis reacted to the first vote by embracing the West Bank settlement movement, which until then had been backed by a minority of Israelis. After the "Zionism is racism" resolution, many felt that if the UN was saying that none of the land belonged to the Jews, we may as well stake our claim to all of it.

For outside criticism to be heard in Israel, it needs to be perceived as fair. The more Israelis feel uniquely singled out—that of all the countries on the planet, Israel is the one whose behavior can't be tolerated by moral people—the more cynical they become about international morality and the more they turn to the hard right. The greatest gift for the hard right is the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement.

Isn't the growth of the ultra-Orthodox population itself producing a much more hardened right wing that is less open to compromise on land?

The growth of the ultra-Orthodox population—now about 9 percent of Israeli society—is worrying, but not for the reason you cite. The ultra-Orthodox want more theocracy and oppose religious pluralism, but they are not an obstacle to an eventual peace agreement. The ultra-Orthodox Shas party, which represents Sephardic voters, is on record as supporting the principle of land for peace. The ultra-Orthodox have their agenda, especially ensuring continued government funding for their institutions and continued draft deferments for their young men who study in yeshiva, or religious academies. They are extreme in religious observance, but generally not in issues of war and peace.

How ominous for Israel is the phenomenon of Jewish terrorism?

Religious-based terrorism is perhaps the most insidious form of terror—spiritually, because it debases God's name and poisons religion, and practically, because it draws from the most potent sources of human inspiration and so is especially hard to uproot. The homegrown Jewish terrorism we're dealing with today in Israel is in essence religious. It seeks to "purify" the land from other peoples and faiths. It's also a revolt against Israel as a secular democratic state.

Until now, Israeli society hasn't taken this threat as seriously as it must. Partly because the numbers of terrorists are small, it can be dismissed as peripheral. But there's a new realization, even within the government, that this is undermining our society.

The turning point happened in August with two nearly simultaneous atrocities: at the Gay Pride parade in Jerusalem, a 16-year-old girl was murdered by an ultra-Orthodox Jew, and in an arson attack against two homes in a Palestinian village, two family members were burned to death, including a baby. The antigay attacker was a lone wolf, but the terrorists who attacked the Palestinian family were almost certainly organized.

With civil war in Syria, the emergence of ISIS, and the growing power of Iran, a new Middle East seems to be in the making. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has become in some ways a sideline to these other developments. What do you see emerging out of these developments with regard to Israel/Palestine?

For the first time since the collapse of the Oslo process in 2000, I feel a small stirring of optimism and can see a way out. The defining conflict in the Middle East is no longer between Arabs and Israelis but between Sunnis and Shi'ites. Much of the West hasn't yet internalized this historic shift. The Saudis are now meeting regularly with Israelis and even allowing those meetings to become public knowledge. This is unprecedented.

During the Gaza War last year, even as anti-Israel demonstrations were happening in the West, Israel was receiving urgent messages from Sunni leaders demanding that it destroy the Hamas regime. Hamas is especially detested by many Sunnis for making common cause with Shi'ite Iran—it's the only Sunni Muslim Brotherhood organization to break ranks in the Sunni-Shi'ite war.

All of which is to say that the Middle East looks very different from the Middle East than it does from the West. When Israelis looks around the region, what we see is that the most intact society left is Israel. I say that with more anxiety than pride, because this is the region in which I live, in which I'm raising a family. My prayer is for a Middle East in which all its peoples will find their safe place. Ultimately, the success of the Jewish homecoming depends on our finding our place in the Middle East.