

## INTRODUCTION

# A STATE (UN)LIKE ANY OTHER STATE

“Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations.”

SAMUEL 8:5

The eminent Oxford philosopher Isaiah Berlin took great pleasure in telling the story of a party he attended in the 1930s where the later president of the State of Israel, Chaim Weizmann, then the leader of the World Zionist Organization, was asked by an aristocratic British lady admirer, “Dr. Weizmann, I do not understand. You are a member of the most cultured, civilized, brilliant and cosmopolitan people in history and you want to give it all up to become—Albania?” According to Isaiah Berlin, Weizmann pondered thoughtfully and slowly on the question, then his face lit up like a light bulb. “Yes!” he exclaimed: “Albania! Albania!”

To become a people like any other people! That was the idea that many Zionists had in mind when they set out to realize their project to create a Jewish state. The Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel internalized this notion in a central passage that stresses “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.” Jews, so their argument went, had always been the archetypal “other” in history. Only by ending the “abnormal” situation of their dispersion in a worldwide diaspora and by reestablishing their own state after two

## 2 INTRODUCTION

millennia would “normality” be regained in the form of a small Jewish state. Thus, the Jews would become “a nation like all other nations” and their state a state like all other states—an imagined Albania.<sup>1</sup>

Over two millennia Jews had received attention way beyond their numerical strength, as historian David Nirenberg observed: “For several thousand years people have been thinking about Judaism. Ancient Egyptians spent a good deal of papyrus on the Hebrews; early (and not so early) Christians filled pages attempting to distinguish between Judaism and Christianity, the New Israel and the Old; Muhammad’s followers pondered their Prophet’s relation to Jews and ‘Sons of Israel’; medieval Europeans invoked Jews to explain topics as diverse as famine, plague, and the tax policies of their princes. And in the vast archives that survive from Early Modern and Modern Europe and its cultural colonies, it is easy enough to demonstrate that words like ‘Jew,’ ‘Hebrew,’ ‘Semite,’ ‘Israelite,’ and ‘Israel,’ appear with a frequency stunningly disproportionate to any populations of living Jews in these societies.”<sup>2</sup>

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman called this phenomenon “allosemitism.” In contrast to the negative “antisemitism” and the positive “philosemitism,” “allosemitism,” which is based on the Greek word for “other,” simply refers “to the practice of setting the Jews apart as people radically different from all the others, needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them and special treatment in all or most social intercourse. . . . It does not unambiguously designate either hatred or love of Jews, but contains the seeds of both, and assures that whichever of the two appears, is intense and extreme.”<sup>3</sup> Allosemitism was endemic to Europe and beyond due in large part to the legacy of the Christian church, which put the Jews “in the role of ambivalence incarnate.” They were beloved as

the people of Jesus but hated as Christ-killers; they were held in esteem for the Old Testament, but despised for not accepting its prophecies as interpreted by the New Testament. In modernity, Jews became the most mobile of all pariahs and parvenus. “They were the epitome of incongruity: a non-national nation, and so cast a shadow on the fundamental principle of modern European order: that nationhood is the essence of human destiny.”<sup>4</sup>

The image of the Jews as the “other” was of course used by Jews themselves as well, and this from earliest times. It originates with the biblical notion of a “chosen people” and is repeated in various forms throughout the books of the Bible and later in rabbinical literature and Jewish liturgy. The daily *Alenu* prayer contains the passage, “For God did not make us like the nations of other lands, and did not make us the same as other families of the Earth. God did not place us in the same situations as others, and our destiny is not the same as anyone else’s.” Otherness is already cited in ancient Jewish sources as the cause for anti-Jewish hatred. According to the biblical book of Esther, Haman, the advisor to the Persian king, claimed:

There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws; it is not in the king’s best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them. (Esther 3:8–9).

While the modern Jewish Reform movement tried to eliminate some of the self-distinctions in liturgy and practice, the notion that the Jews remained different was shared by many Jews and non-Jews alike in the twentieth century. Israel

#### 4 INTRODUCTION

Mattuck, the most prominent Liberal rabbi in England in the first half of the twentieth century, wrote in 1939: “The Jews are anomalous because they do not fit into any of the three normal categories for the classification of human groups. . . . Though the Jews are not a race, they are a separate group; though they are not a nation, they have from remote times memories of a national life; though they are dispersed, they are unified. The unity of the Jews is psychological, produced by their religion, history, and experience. The Jews are unique.”<sup>5</sup>

Zionism aimed to overcome this sense of otherness by forcing the Jews to fit into categories valid in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Once they were universally regarded as a nation and had their own state, they would no longer be vulnerable to assaults against their alleged uniqueness and cease to be victims of antisemitic attacks. The Zionist Joseph Heller summarized this attitude when he wrote shortly before the State of Israel was founded: “A nation, like an individual, is normal and healthy only when it is able to use *all* forms of innate gifts and harmoniously to unfold *all* forms of economic and cultural creativeness. For this purpose the nation needs political freedom and the right to utilize the natural resources of the soil as the basis of its economic growth. The task of normalization means for the Jews a real ‘transvaluation of values,’ because of the unquestioned hegemony of the spirit throughout Diaspora history. . . . Above all, the nation must ‘return to the soil’ not only in the physical sense but also in the psychological.”<sup>6</sup>

Seventy years after the establishment of the State of Israel, Israel has achieved many goals of the Zionist movement, but the plan to become a state “like any other” has not been fulfilled. If the Jews were the archetypical “other” in history,

ironically, Israel—which so much wanted to avoid the stamp of otherness—has become the Jew among the nations. The Jewish state is rarely conceived as just a state like any other state, but rather as unique and exceptional: it is seen either as a model state or as a pariah state.

Israel ranks as 148th of the 196 independent states in terms of geographical area, and as 97th in terms of population, which is somewhere between Belize and Djibouti. However, the international attention it attracts is exponentially greater than that of Belize or Djibouti, or for that matter Albania. Considering only the volume of media attention it attracts, one might reasonably assume that the Jewish state is in the same league as the United States, Russia, and China. In the United States, for the last three decades, Israel has figured more prominently than almost any other country in foreign policy debates; in polls across Europe, Israel is considered to be the greatest danger to world peace; and in Islamic societies it has become routine to burn Israeli flags and argue for Israel's demise. No other country has been the subject of as many UN resolutions as Israel. At the same time, many people around the world credit Israel with a unique role in the future course of world history. Evangelical Christians regard the Jewish state as a major player in their eschatological model of the world. Their convictions have influenced US policies in the Middle East and the opinions of some political leaders in other parts of the world. Following Zygmunt Bauman's concept, one might speak today of a phenomenon called allo-Zionism.

The idea of exceptionalism exists, of course, in many other national narratives as well. The Greeks regarded all other nations as barbarians, and the French believed in their *mission civilisatrice*. Over decades, historians have had heated discus-

sions over the thesis of a peculiar path of German history.<sup>7</sup> And, as C. Vann Woodward reminded us, American historians have always been accused of laying “excessive claims to distinctiveness and uniqueness in their national experience.”<sup>8</sup> “American Exceptionalism” has been characterized by values such as freedom, egalitarianism, and laissez-faire principles.<sup>9</sup> The United States of America also shares with Israel the notion of being a “chosen nation,” as Todd Gitlin and Liel Leibovitz have noted: “Amid an epic history of claims to heaven-sent entitlement, only two nation-states stand out for the fundamental, continuous, and enduring quality of their convictions, and the intense seriousness (and hostility) with which others take their claims: the United States and Israel.”<sup>10</sup> What distinguishes the case of Israel from other exceptionalisms is the fact that it is regarded as an exceptional state not only by itself, but by much of the rest of the world as well. Based on the accounts in the foundational texts of both Christianity and Islam, where the Jews were often viewed as the prototypical other, the Jewish state became the collective expression of “the other state.” Even in scholarship, both in Israel and outside the Jewish state, it seems almost normal to point to the *abnormal* character of Israel’s history. Historians, sociologists, and political scientists provide many different interpretations of Israel, but they seem to agree on its uniqueness. To cite a few random contemporary examples: Daniel Elazar’s study of Israel’s society begins with the sentence, “The State of Israel is, in many respects, *sui generis*.”<sup>11</sup> Uri Bialer opens his analysis of Israel’s foreign policy as follows: “Among the nations of the world Israel is unique.”<sup>12</sup> Todd Gitlin and Liel Leibovitz claim: “Why not inter the Zionist movement in the history books and turn to the governance of an ordinary state in a world of states? The answer is obvious. Israel is not, has never been, and can never

be an ordinary state.”<sup>13</sup> Law professor Yedidia Stern takes a clear position when he states: “The State of Israel cannot be satisfied with a ‘normal’ democratic existence and should not divest itself of its Jewish uniqueness.”<sup>14</sup> Michael Barnett writes in his study on Israel’s alleged singularity: “Israel slips through the cracks because it is perceived as existing outside or blurring most conceptual boundaries and categories.”<sup>15</sup> And to provide one last example among many, Jerold Auerbach states: “Israel remains a historic anomaly.”<sup>16</sup>

Authors critical of Israel, or even hostile toward it, often share this perception of Israel’s anomaly, though coming at it from the opposite point of view. American-Palestinian literary scholar and political activist Edward Said, for example, has claimed: “A Jewish state is on national, religious, cultural, juridical, and political grounds different from any other state.” In his view, the Jewish search for normality results in the abnormal situation of the Palestinians: “If, in a Jewish state, normality is defined by Jewishness, abnormality is the normal condition of the non-Jew.”<sup>17</sup> Referring to Said’s model, North-eastern University economist M. Shahid Alam, who denies Israel’s right of existence, suggests: “A deeper irony surrounded the Zionist project. It proposed to end Jewish ‘abnormalcy’ in Europe by creating an ‘abnormal’ Jewish state in Palestine. . . . Clearly, the Zionists were proposing to trade one ‘abnormalcy’ for a greater, more ominous one.”<sup>18</sup> Zionists and anti-Zionists, Israelis, and opponents of the Jewish state seem to agree on one thing: Israel is different from other states.

The ultimate irony is that the term “normalization,” so often employed by Zionists in order to correct the path of Jewish history, has in the twenty-first century received a meaning turned against Israel. Resistance against the normalization of relations with a Jewish state has characterized those who

identify Israel as a settler-colonialist state. It has become a frequent slogan in the BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanction) campaign. Normalization stands for them as a “colonization of the mind.” As one activist website puts it: “The normalization of Israel—normalizing the abnormal—is a malicious and subversive process that works to cover up injustice and colonize the most intimate parts of the oppressed: their mind.”<sup>19</sup> In the eyes of the opponents of Israel’s normalization, Israel should be treated differently from other states and ultimately become what the Jews have always been: the other, the abnormal. Thus, the use of the concept of normalization, launched by the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century as a response to antisemitism has gone full circle. Used in its negative sense, it now serves the opponents of Israel to delegitimize the existence of the Jewish state.

There are numerous reasons why many people perceive the tiny State of Israel as unique and ascribe to it a meaning of universal significance. To start with, it was probably naïve to assume that the centuries-old stereotype of the Jew as the classical outsider would simply disappear with the advent of the Zionist movement. Stereotypes and opinions of the Jews have been etched so deeply into the minds of so many people across the world that an indifferent position toward a Jewish state is almost impossible. As if this were not enough, Israel’s birth was directly connected to a genocide unique in modern history. Moreover, in contrast to other modern states, most of Israel’s first-generation citizens did not originate in the territory that would later become their state. Neither did their immediate ancestors. Israel has the unique distinction of being what we might call an almost completely “imported nation.”



A closer look will show that there is an additional element in Zionist history that runs counter to Weizmann's desire to become just another Albania, a desire that will be explored in greater depth in this book. While he and other Zionist thinkers and Israeli statesmen claimed to strive simply for a state "like all other states," they themselves were in reality not satisfied with such a concept. They aspired to more, namely to create a model state and thus to fulfill the goal of the ancient prophets that Israel become "a light unto the nations."<sup>20</sup> It was this internal contradiction between an aspired normality and a claimed uniqueness that constituted and continues to constitute an enormous challenge for the self-definition of the Jewish state.

Beginning with the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, there existed always a very strong conviction among Zionists that a Jewish state must be a model society for all humankind. David Ben-Gurion, the most important political leader in Palestine from the 1930s and the first prime minister of Israel, repeatedly called for the establishment of a state that would fulfill the biblical vision of the Jews as a "light unto the nations." This demand is reiterated by a long line of Israeli leaders, all the way up to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In an address at the Herzliya Conference in 2010, for example, he called the Jewish people "a proud people with a magnificent country and one which always aspires to serve as 'a light unto the nations.'"<sup>21</sup> His education minister, Gideon Sa'ar, declared that the task of the country's education system should be turning the country into "a light unto the nations."<sup>22</sup> Official Israel continues to display this ideal in many variations and on many different levels. Thus, visitors arriving at Ben-Gurion Airport today (2017) are confronted in an

exhibition on Zionist and Israeli history with Theodor Herzl's words: "Zionism encompasses not only the hope of a legally secured homeland for our people . . . but also the aspiration to reach moral and spiritual perfection."<sup>23</sup>

Concepts like "normality" and "uniqueness" cannot be measured scientifically. They are a matter of subjective perception.<sup>24</sup> Israel's exceptionalism might well be a myth, but like every well-cultivated myth it has become a reality in the imagination of many people. This book does not try to substantiate or demystify the question of whether Israel is a unique state or a "state like any other state." It describes rather a discourse over exactly this question, which runs like a scarlet thread through the text. It will serve us as a key for addressing the most important questions for accessing the very nature of this first Jewish state in modern history. Is it a state based on a common ethnicity or religion? Should it be a state where Jews from the whole world can find a safe haven but continue to live their lives just as they did before in their old homes, or should it be a Jewish state in which they will cleave to new values, different from those of their countries of origin? What are the borders of this state? And what is the role of non-Jews in a Jewish state?

This book traces the tensions between particularistic and universal elements in the idea of a Jewish state by recounting how Zionist visionaries imagined such a state and how Israeli leaders implemented these ideas over the course of a century. It is not a history of Israel's wars and its politics, but concentrates instead on the essential question of the meaning of this state and its transformation.<sup>25</sup> It tells the story of a state as it emerges in the minds of its own leaders and in the imagination of the larger world. It is the story of the real and the imagined Israel, of Israel as a state and as an idea.

The history of Israel has always been a global history, for the very reason that the Jewish people were spread around the globe. Political Zionism has its roots in various parts of Europe, it spread to America, and it has affected the Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. Histories of Zionism and of Israel often neglect to show, however, the context in which their main protagonists acted. Thus, it is almost forgotten today that the Zionist movement was just one of several paths European Jews sought to take in order to “normalize” their peculiar situation. That is why this book opens with a chapter on a crucial year in Jewish history, 1897. It was a watershed year for modern Jewish history, and not only because the First Zionist Congress convened that year. Within a few months, four distinct new paths for a projected “normalization” of Jewish history were publicly proposed: Radical assimilationism, diaspora Autonomism, socialist Bundism, and political Zionism. As the first chapter of this book will show, the emergence of Zionism as a political movement has to be seen in the larger context of competing Jewish responses to the challenges of the new century.

The second chapter traces the *Kulturkampf* within the Zionist movement between the concepts of a state of the Jews and a Jewish state. One model was Theodor Herzl’s New Society, which projected not only a refuge for persecuted Jews, but also an exemplary society for all humankind. This society was to be Jewish mostly in the sense that the majority of its members would be Jews. However, they would neither speak Hebrew (nor Yiddish), nor would Jewish culture or religion play any significant role in their foundational concepts. Herzl’s Seven-Hour-Land, based on the idea of a seven-hour working day, would be a cosmopolitan model state, emphasizing social improvement and technological innovation. He portrayed it

as a tolerant society, embracing Jews and non-Jews, and denying membership only to those who aspired to establish an exclusive theocracy at the expense of others. His model competed with more particularistic paradigms. Cultural Zionists strove for the renewal of the Hebrew language and the creation of a distinct secular Jewish culture, while socialist Zionists aimed at creating an ideal “New Jew,” who would work the soil in a collectivist settlement (*kibbutz*), and religious Zionists envisioned a society based on *halakha*, the principles of Jewish religious law. For all of them, Herzl’s model meant simply imitating bourgeois European culture and transporting a Western European society to the Middle East, or in other words, assimilation on a collective scale. While Herzl wanted to save the Jews from antisemitism, other Zionists wanted to save Judaism and Jewish culture from complete assimilation.

Chapter 3 discusses the road to statehood in the wake of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that had promised the Jews “a national home in Palestine,” but without defining what exactly was meant by this vague term. The Zionists, too, remained unclear for a long time about the meaning of Jewish sovereignty. Based on recent scholarship, I will suggest that for the mainstream General Zionists led by Chaim Weizmann and for the socialist Zionists led by David Ben-Gurion, far-reaching autonomy under British or international rule seemed a more realistic option than full independence until World War II. Even the nationalist Revisionists around Vladimir Ze’ev Jabotinsky, who fought for a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan River, proposed concepts quite different from what would eventually become the State of Israel. In Jabotinsky’s vision of a greater Palestine on both sides of the Jordan River, Arabs would not only enjoy full equality, they would be represented at the highest echelons of power.

This chapter looks at the different blueprints for a future Jewish national home, both inside and outside of Palestine. The various concepts of a future Jewish society *in Palestine* were part of a broader global struggle to establish a place for Jewish self-determination. During the 1920s and 30s the rise of right-wing antisemitic regimes in Europe increased the sense of urgency for a Jewish place of refuge anywhere in the world. In contrast to the Zionists who envisioned Jews settling in their historical homeland, the Territorialists advocated for the creation of a Jewish territory either in Australia, East Africa, or South America, places where they supposedly would not encounter opposition. By relinquishing the idea of connecting this territory with their ancient past, they also relinquished to a large degree the notion of uniqueness that came with that past. And it was precisely the lack of this historic notion that made the idea unpopular among most Jews. A Jewish state in East Africa or South America might have seemed pragmatic at the time and, in retrospect, it might well have saved many lives, but it lacked the emotional attraction of the Zionists' plan tied to the Jews' ancestral land.

As mentioned above, the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel internalized the notion of the “normalization” of Jewish history in a central passage that stresses “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State. Jews, so the argument went, had always been the archetypal “other” in history. Only by ending the “abnormal” situation of their dispersion in a worldwide diaspora and by reestablishing their own small Jewish state after two millennia would normality be regained. But their idea was not to create a state “like any other state,” for the founders maintained that a Jewish state arising from a catastrophe, which they viewed as

the culmination of a long history of suffering, was obligated to play a unique role: It should become the materialization of the biblical mission of the Jews as “a light unto the nations.” The rejection of the state’s existence by its Arab neighbors only strengthened its need for legitimacy.

Chapter 4 explains what Ben-Gurion and Israel’s first governments envisioned in striving to become a model society for all humankind—and what the idea of a Jewish state meant after the State of Israel was established. It follows also the repeated attempts to define who is Jewish in a Jewish state. The Law of Return of 1950 stated that every Jew had the right to “return” to Israel and would be granted Israeli citizenship—but it left the legal definition of who was a Jew open. In an unprecedented action, Ben-Gurion sent out a letter to fifty of the most respected Jewish intellectuals all over the world asking them to provide their definition on the question of who is a Jew—and thus qualified to become an Israeli citizen. Several times, Israel’s Supreme Court and Israel’s parliament, the Knesset, uttered their own verdicts on this question. Their broad and inclusive definitions reflected the secular nature of the Jewish state during the first decades of its existence.

In 1967, Israel experienced its second founding. With its triumphant victory in the Six-Day War, Israel stood once again in the spotlight of the entire world. It emerged as a regional power and became identified with the biblical Goliath rather than with its traditional image of David, the underdog. In addition, with newly conquered territories in the Golan Heights, the West Bank of the Jordan River, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula, Israel came to govern over a much larger Arab population. The political climate within the country became increasingly nationalistic, and the triumph of right-wing parties under Menachem Begin in the

1977 elections was regarded as a revolution in Israeli politics. Perhaps the most significant transformation of Israel's society is to be found during this decade.

As told in chapter 5, the short-lived reality of a small and modest state was now replaced by the lavish vision of a Greater Israel, often interpreted as a fulfillment of Israel's divine mission and the unique role the Jewish state has to play in history. Combined with the political and religious radicalization of the Palestinian population, this not only led to new conflicts, such as the two Palestinian uprisings, but also to a precipitous decline in popularity of the secular and socialist models of the state's early leaders. Instead, more nationalistic and more religious definitions of the uniqueness of the Jewish state gained ground. The settler ideal began to replace the kibbutz ideal, the idea of the holy land superseded that of the secular state.

This process was briefly interrupted in the 1990s, when an alternative vision of Israel as part of a new Middle East emerged. Under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and with the participation and encouragement of the United States, Israel signed a peace agreement with the Jordanians in 1994. (A similar understanding had been reached with Egypt already in 1978.) The Oslo Accords, reached in 1993 and then 1995 with the Palestinians, signaled a new approach of reconciliation—and normalization. Rabin's long-time associate (and rival) Shimon Peres imagined a region in which Israel and the Arab states would be united in their aspirations for a common economic market and for political stability. Ultimately, they failed in their attempts to create normality for the Jewish state as an integral part of the Middle East.

The assassination of Rabin by a Jewish extremist, the following wave of violence, and the inflexibility of the Palestinian leadership brought the peace process to a standstill. But

Israeli society continued its process of transformation. In economic terms, it was transformed into a first-world country, a fact formally recognized by its joining the OECD in 2010. The Israel of the twenty-first century has been dubbed “the Start-Up Nation,” and has one of the world’s most successful high-tech industries. There was a price to pay, however. The state that once was proud of the relative equality in the lifestyle of its citizens has become a society with a wide gap between rich and poor.

Global Israel is far more than a phenomenon of the economic market. While most of Israel’s new immigrants at the turn of the millennium came from the former Soviet Union, there are also “new Jews” knocking at Israel’s doors. Millions of people in Africa and Asia who define themselves as descendants of the so-called lost tribes of the biblical Israelites would be eligible for Israeli citizenship if they were recognized as Jews by Israel’s Chief Rabbinate. Not only are today’s new immigrants more global than ever before—but so are Israel’s emigrants. Contrary to the original Zionist ideal which envisioned the gathering of the exiles as part of the normalization of the Jewish situation, the Jewish diaspora has not only remained in existence but has actually grown as the result of an Israeli diaspora. New York and Los Angeles, and more recently Berlin—of all places—have become popular destinations for Israelis leaving their homeland, either temporarily or permanently. As chapter 6 will show, “alternative Israels” have gained prominence in literary and artistic form as well, from Eshkol Nevo’s utopian novel *Neuland* to Yael Bartana’s video project “Europe Will Be Stunned” about an imaginary return of Israeli Jews to Poland. As I argue in this chapter, ironically, the longing for normality in their lives has led Israeli citizens to look for new homes abroad and Israeli writers



and artists to embrace the diaspora that once was so much despised by Zionism.

The conclusion of the book points to the crossroads where Israel stands today. On the one hand, it is an economically flourishing start-up nation with a universalist tradition and cosmopolitan habits. On the other, it is a country very much caught in the conflicts within its own region. For over half a century Israel has controlled a territory of unclear political status and a people that rejects its rule. It is a deeply divided society, in which both the secular population and universalist values are declining, while religious and more particularistic elements gain ground. It is a country with enormous achievements and one that has suffered setbacks. It is a state constantly at the center of global attention and, for better or worse, anything but “another Albania.”