



The months of war in Gaza have raised intense questions about the nature of the Jewish state. Is Israel acting, as any state has a right to do, to protect itself against enemies bent on its elimination? Or has it gone too far down the road toward religious and ethnic extremism?

As those questions dominate our minds and media, however, they are crowding out what is the most important development in the more-than-two-thousand-year history of the Jewish people. No, I am not referring to Israel's birth in 1948, significant as that event was. I mean instead that in the years after World War II, a vibrant, successful, and above all else, secure life has, for the first time, become possible in states in which Jews are, and always will be, in the minority.

"In the diaspora," proclaimed [HAY 9Vt&bcA Jgh](#) in the summer of 2012, "Jewish life has never been so free, so prosperous, so unthreatened." That Jews can live among gentiles without living in fear is an epochal accomplishment, as much testimony to the perseverance of those who have made the Diaspora their home as it is to the willingness of their compatriots to overcome centuries of prejudice. Most remarkable of all, it is rarely remarked.

It is time for the Diaspora to have its due. Living at the mercy of the majorities around them throughout history, Jews have experienced more than their fair share of discrimination and destruction, the latter as thorough and unwarranted as any group has ever faced. Nor can there be any doubt that anti-Semitism persists throughout the contemporary world and rears its ugly head all too many times.

Yet lost in the tales of endless woe that Jews so frequently tell each other has been the opportunity that living in a land not their own has offered: a deep understanding of unfairness and a commitment to the absolute necessity of fighting against it. "Exile and dispersion," as David J. Goldberg, rabbi emeritus of London's Liberal Jewish Synagogue, writes of the Jews, "far from being the disasters they were invariably considered to be were in fact blessings in disguise, enabling them to escape the fate that befell other contemporary nations rooted in a single territory." Now that they have become so much safer in non-Jewish lands, Diaspora Jews are in a stronger-than-ever position to transform the passion for justice that so moved the Hebrew prophets into ideals of human dignity desperately needed in an age of rising domestic inequality and overseas instability.

That, unfortunately, has not been happening, at least not enough. The Jewish Defense League, based in New York and Los Angeles, with the mandate "to protect Jews from anti-Semitism," is a violence-prone organization rightly condemned by Jews around the world. But defensiveness is widespread among all those Diaspora Jews who remain reluctant to accept the fact that at long last they belong where they have chosen to live.

It is not difficult to grasp why. For the past 70-plus years—the same years in which I, born in 1942, have been alive—Jewish life has been marked by the shift, in the course of a mere decade, from the horrors of the Holocaust to the haven offered by statehood. Those events are inevitably linked, and not just because Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) occurs just a week before Yom Ha'atzmaut (Israeli Independence Day).

It is often said that there exists within Judaism a tension between particularism and universalism, one of those dichotomies that on the one hand greatly oversimplifies but on the other contains a good deal of truth: Particularists believe that Jews should be primarily concerned with their own, while universalists insist they are under a special obligation to spread the light of reason to as many people as possible. The twin events that have dominated contemporary Jewish life created an environment especially conducive to particularism: The Holocaust singled out Jews for extermination, while Israel singled them out for citizenship. Statehood promised a final solution to the Final Solution: Now that they had achieved it, Jews would finally constitute a nation like the others, able to speak in their own name and defend their own interests.

Finality, alas, was not to be. Because it was built on land occupied by others, the Jewish state has been unable to satisfy the need for security that gave rise to it. Nor, despite a dynamic economy and numerous efforts at outreach, has it been able to appeal to all Jews. Many Jews have made aliyah (ascent), the Hebrew word that characterizes the decision to leave the Diaspora for Israel. Today, roughly half the world Jewry lives there. Worse, at least for those who consider Israel the only appropriate home for the Jews, a significant number of Israelis in recent years have made [nyfjXU\z](#)or descent into the gentile world.)

As it increasingly becomes clear that the Diaspora is not a disaster and that the security offered by statehood is precarious, the

lost universalism that was so much a part of Jewish tradition may well be prepared for a comeback, and this time on firmer ground than in the past. That will be good for the Jews no matter where they live, Israel very much included. It will be just as important for the non-Jews with whom they live, Israel, again, very much included.

As important as it may be to achieve, no one should expect that a revival of diasporic universalism will prove easy. There are four intimately interconnected reasons why so many Jews are determined never to forget the events of the 1930s and 1940s, no matter the cost to the universalist element in their own tradition.

The first is the feeling, strongly believed if rarely explicitly stated, that honoring the living somehow insults the dead. Six million Jews, from this perspective, did not die so that another six million could lead the good life in New York, Toronto, London, or, God forbid, Berlin. Since Hitler was determined to kill each and every one of them, any Jew who is now alive must be so through sheer chance: by the decision of one's grandparents to leave Europe before it all began, for example, or by the fact that they boarded one train rather than another, or because they had the right connections to obtain an elusive exit visa. When survival is the result of individual fortitude, pride in longevity follows. When it is a roll of the dice, the winners ought to have the good sense not to brag. Every living Jew must understand that he or she is taking the place of another who never had the opportunity. Guilt that pervasive is not easily overcome.

The never fully quarantined disease of anti-Semitism is commonly brought forward as the second reason for Jews not to succumb to any illusion of security in the Diaspora. Waiting for the next Hitler to appear requires that instances of Jew hatred be told and retold with increasing fervor. How, this responsive reading asks, can any Jew be safe in Paris when Jewish children are



Unlike those who see threats to Jewish continuity from both anti-Semitism and assimilation, I believe that Judaism, which has been around so long, is not going away anytime soon. The crucial question is what kind of Judaism it will be: open and inquiring or defensive and insecure. No one can know the answer to that question; so much happened to the Jews in the 20th century that presuming to predict what will happen to them in the remainder of the 21st is beyond anyone's capacity. But just as Israel is a fact of life, and, in my opinion, has every right to exist (although I hope in a humane way rather than the one its current direction indicates), the Diaspora also is here to stay, and with it the universalism that was so much part of its history.

Such universalism could prove a great help to Israel as it contemplates the possibility of endless wars with its neighbors. Once the source of financial support, the Diaspora can become a place for the expression of morality. Israel lacks what the Diaspora nourishes: A vision more capacious than the state's current policy of making more enemies in the process of relying on violence to deal with those who already exist.

Like so many others concerned about where Jewish nationalism has led, I prefer a Judaism that is special but not chosen to one that is chosen but not special. Jews survive best, for themselves and for the gentile world around them, when they do more than live but live up to an ideal.

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