

Ari Shavit, My Promised Land (2013)

INTRODUCTION

Question Marks

FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, I REMEMBER FEAR. EXISTENTIAL FEAR. The Israel I grew up in—the Israel of the mid-1960s—was energetic, exuberant, and hopeful. But I always felt that beyond the well-to-do houses and upper-middle-class lawns of my hometown lay a dark ocean. One day, I dreaded, that dark ocean would rise and drown us all. A mythological tsunami would strike our shores and sweep my Israel away. It would become another Atlantis, lost in the depths of the sea.

One morning in June 1967, when I was nine years old, I came upon my father shaving in the bathroom. I asked him if the Arabs were going to win. Would the Arabs conquer our Israel? Would they really throw us all into the sea? A few days later the Six Day War began.

In October 1973, the sirens of imminent disaster began to wail. I was in bed with the flu in the late noon of that silent Yom Kippur as F-4 jets tore through the sky. They were flying 500 feet above our roof en route to the Suez Canal to fend off the invading Egyptian forces that took Israel by surprise. Many of them never returned. I was sixteen years old, and I was petrified as the news came in of the collapse of our defenses in the Sinai desert and the Golan Heights. For ten terrifying days it seemed that my primordial fears were justified. Israel was in peril. The walls of the third Jewish temple were shaking.

In January 1991, the first Gulf War broke out. Tel Aviv was bombarded by Iraqi SCUD missiles. There was some concern regarding a possible chemical weapons attack. For weeks, Israelis carried their gas mask kits with them everywhere they went. Occasionally, when a warning sounded that a warhead was on its way, we shut ourselves in sealed rooms with the masks on our faces. Although it turned out that the threat was not real, there was something horrific about this surreal ritual. I listened closely to the sounds of sirens and looked with dismay at the terrified eyes of my loved ones locked in German-made gas masks.

In March 2002, a wave of terror rattled Israel. Hundreds died as Palestinian suicide bombers attacked buses, nightclubs, and shopping malls. As I was writing in my Jerusalem study one night, I heard a loud boom. It had to be our neighborhood pub, I realized. I grabbed my writing pad and ran up the street. Three handsome young men were sitting at the bar in front of their half-full beer mugs—dead. A petite young woman was lying in a corner—lifeless. Those who were only wounded were screaming and crying. As I looked at the hell around me in the glowing lights of the blown-up pub, the journalist I now was asked, What will be? How long can we sustain this lunacy? Will there come a time when the vitality we Israelis are known for will surrender to the forces of death attempting to annihilate us?

The decisive victory in the 1967 war dissipated the prewar fears. The recovery of the 1970s and 1980s healed the deep wound of 1973. The peace process of the 1990s mended the trauma of 1991. The prosperity of the late 2000s glossed over the horror of 2002. Precisely because we are shrouded in uncertainty, we Israelis insist on believing in ourselves, in our nation-state, and in our future. But throughout the years, my own muted fear never went away. To discuss or express this fear was taboo, yet it was with me wherever I went. Our cities seemed to be built on shifting sand. Our houses never seemed quite stable. Even as my nation grew stronger and wealthier, I felt it was profoundly vulnerable. I realized how exposed we are, how constantly intimidated. Yes, our life continues to be intense and rich and in many ways happy. Israel projects a sense of security that emanates from its physical, economic, and military success. The vitality of our daily life is astonishing. And yet there is always the fear that one day daily life will freeze like Pompeii's.

My beloved homeland will crumble as enormous Arab masses or mighty Islamic forces overcome its defenses and eradicate its existence.

For as long as I can remember, I remember occupation. Only a week after I asked my father whether the Arab nations were going to conquer Israel, Israel conquered the Arab-populated regions of the West Bank and Gaza. A month later, my parents, my brother, and I embarked on a first family tour of the occupied cities of Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Hebron. Wherever we went, there were remains of burned Jordanian jeeps, trucks, and military vehicles. White flags of surrender hung over most houses. Some streets were blocked with the mangled, blackened carcasses of fancy Mercedes automobiles that had been run over by the treads of Israeli tanks. Palestinian children my age and younger had fear in their eyes. Their parents appeared devastated and humiliated. Within a few weeks the mighty Arabs were transformed into victims, while the endangered Israelis became conquerors. The Jewish state was now triumphant and proud and drunk with a heady sense of power.

When I was a teenager, everything was still fine. The common wisdom was that ours was a benevolent military occupation. Modern Israel brought progress and prosperity to the Palestinian regions. Now our backward neighbors had the electricity and running water and health care they never had before. They had to realize that they had never had it so good. They were surely grateful for all that we bestowed upon them. And when peace came, we would hand back most of the occupied territories. But for the time being, all was well in the Land of Israel. Arab and Jew coexisted throughout the country, enjoying calm and plenty.

Only when I was a soldier did I grasp that something was wrong. Six months after joining the elite paratrooper brigade of the IDF, I was posted in the very same occupied cities that I had toured as a child ten years earlier. Now I was assigned to do the dirty work: checkpoint duties, house arrests, violent dispersal of demonstrations. What traumatized me most was breaking into homes and taking young men from their warm beds to midnight interrogations. What the hell was going on, I asked myself. Why was I defending my homeland by tyrannizing

civilians who were deprived of their rights and freedom? Why was my Israel occupying and oppressing another people?

So I became a peacenik. First as a young activist and then as a journalist, I fought occupation with a passion. In the 1980s I opposed establishing settlements in the Palestinian territories. In the 1990s I supported the establishment of a PLO-led Palestinian state. In the first decade of the twenty-first century I endorsed Israel's unilateral retreat from the Gaza Strip. But almost all the antioccupation campaigns I was involved with ultimately failed. Almost half a century after my family first toured the occupied West Bank, the West Bank is still occupied. As malignant as it is, occupation has become an integral part of the Jewish state's being. It has also become an integral part of my life as an Israeli. Although I oppose occupation, I am responsible for occupation. I cannot deny the fact or escape the fact that my nation has become an occupying nation.

Only a few years ago did it suddenly dawn on me that my existential fear regarding my nation's future and my moral outrage regarding my nation's occupation policy are not unconnected. On the one hand, Israel is the only nation in the West that is occupying another people. On the other hand, Israel is the only nation in the West that is existentially threatened. Both occupation and intimidation make the Israeli condition unique. Intimidation and occupation have become the two pillars of our condition.

Most observers and analysts deny this duality. The ones on the left address occupation and overlook intimidation, while the ones on the right address intimidation and dismiss occupation. But the truth is that without incorporating both elements into one worldview, one cannot grasp Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Any school of thought that does not relate seriously to these two fundamentals is bound to be flawed and futile. Only a third approach that internalizes both intimidation and occupation can be realistic and moral and get the Israel story right.

I was born in 1957 in the university town of Rehovot. My father was a scientist, my mother an artist, and some of my ancestors were among the founders of the Zionist enterprise. Conscripted to the army at eighteen, like most Israelis, I served as a paratrooper, and upon completion

of my service I studied philosophy at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where I joined the peace movement and later the human rights movement. Since 1995, I have been writing for Israel's leading liberal newspaper, *Haaretz*. Although I always stood for peace and supported the two-state solution, I gradually became aware of the flaws and biases of the peace movement. My understanding of both occupation and intimidation made my voice somewhat different from those of others in the media. And as a columnist, I challenge both right-wing and left-wing dogmas. I have learned that there are no simple answers in the Middle East and no quick-fix solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have realized that the Israeli condition is extremely complex, perhaps even tragic.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century Israel did well. Terror subsided, high tech boomed, everyday life was vibrant. Economically, Israel proved to be a tiger. Existentially, it proved to be a powerhouse of vitality, creativity, and sensuality. But under the glow of an extraordinary success story, anxiety was simmering. People started asking aloud the questions that I have been asking myself all my life. It was not just Left-Right politics anymore. It was not just secular versus religious. Something deeper was taking place. Many Israelis were not at ease with the new Israel that was emerging. They were asking themselves if they still belonged to the Jewish state. They had lost their belief in Israel's ability to endure. Some obtained foreign passports; some sent their young to study abroad. The elite saw to it that alongside the Israeli option they would have an alternative one. Although most Israelis still loved their homeland and celebrated its blessings, many lost their unshaken faith in its future.

As the second decade of the twenty-first century has begun to unfold, five different apprehensions cast a shadow on Israel's voracious appetite for life: the notion that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might not end in the foreseeable future; the concern that Israel's regional strategic hegemony is being challenged; the fear that the very legitimacy of the Jewish state is eroding; the concern that a deeply transformed Israeli society is now divided and polarized, its liberal-democratic foundation crumbling; and the realization that the dysfunctional governments of