

Victor or Victim? Time to Celebrate Creativity

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Jerusalem's Western wall on the Jewish New Year (Credit: www.pixabay.com)

By Ido Aharoni (special for the Jerusalem Post)

Jerusalem, September 24th, 2020— — In the Middle East “Peace” primarily means non-belligerency. Therefore, you can have “Peace” without normalization. But you cannot have full normalization without peaceful relations. In the case of Egypt and Jordan, a peace agreement was needed to end a state of war, but no normalization took place.

This is not the case with most of the Gulf countries. Informal ties started decades ago involving academics, business and back-channel diplomacy. For a while, Israel had low-level diplomatic representation in Oman, Qatar (as well as Morocco and Tunisia in the Maghreb).

Due to the Arab Economic boycott of 1945 and the ensuing 1948 war, all members of the Arab League were legally considered by Israel as enemies. Just as the world began to fully realize the scope and the magnitude of the Holocaust, the Arab League made the most inhumane (and evidently counterproductive) decision: to eliminate the tiny community in then-Palestine, of less than 500,000 Jews, by suffocating its miniscule economy. Yet, most Arab countries, although they actively participated in the diplomatic onslaught against Israel, practiced non-belligerency.

Analysts attach great importance to the negative regional role played by Iran as a main catalyst for this positive diplomatic development. Some see the agreements as a direct by-product of the brewing U.S.-China tension. Once again, the Middle East is being shaped by a global power struggle. Some say that the main catalyst is the new Trump doctrine vis-à-vis the Palestinians, rejecting the a-priori demand for American evenhandedness and combining it with the willingness to sanction the ongoing Palestinian intransigence. Trump's policy, they say, eliminated the traditional Palestinian veto power over normalization with Israel.

That's all correct. But there's another reason, less discussed: the rise of creativity as the most sought-after human asset.



Hip-Hop icon Russell Simmons visiting Holocaust exhibit at the UN in 2004 (Credit: Shahar Azran)

Edward de Bono, Sir Ken Robinson, Richard Florida and many others — were right: human creativity is the main predictor to success in the age of technology. Nations and economies that possess the ability to nurture and cultivate creativity will perform better. In the case of Israel, it means to punch way above your weight. With only 9.2 million people, Israel has a massive footprint in all aspects of creativity, from the kitchen to the big screen to the dance floor all the way to the laboratory.

In the wake of the attacks of 9/11, through a series of groundbreaking global studies, it became clear that Israel would be better off positioning itself around its creative spirit rather than engage in the futile debate about the conflict. Those who insisted that the only task at hand is to win the debate, doomed Israel to decades of severe underperformance in tourism, foreign investment and international goodwill. No country, no institution and no brand can prosper by constantly highlighting its problems. And that's exactly what Israel tried to do for decades failing to recognize the basics of marketing.

And then Steve Jobs introduced the first smartphone. Historians will mark 2007 as the year that forever changed human communications. For the first time, people could self-design their own informational feed, thus eliminating the prominence of the VIP's of the

old-world — the editors and the gatekeepers. Those who benefitted from perpetuating Israel's geo-political hardships, especially vis-a-vis the Palestinians, were replaced by a kicking, vibrant, rich and transparent conversation. The monopoly ended. Israelis themselves became the chief communicators of their country and culture. Millions of Israelis are constantly communicating their lives to their peers globally. And they do so authentically, reliably and attractively highlighting Israel's main strengths: diversity, open internal debate and boundless creativity. This is the main explanation as to the dramatic improvement in Israel's performance.

The Arab Boycott is rapidly fading as Israel's neighbors, too, strive to turn their economies into hubs of creativity and knowledge. There is a new generation of young Arab leaders looking around with great concern as their oil reserves are depleting and the world is gradually shifting to a more responsible form of consumption, in accordance with the principles of sustainability. They need to redesign the foundations of their economies if they want to remain competitive in the 21st century. Israel is the most immediate and natural strategic partner for regimes aspiring to adapt to the new technological realities. UAE and Bahrain are only the beginning.

Normalization also signals the ultimate triumph of the Zionist idea — the call for Jewish self-determination. Between mid-19th century until 1924, over 2 million Jews left eastern Europe and moved to North America. This tremendous wave of newcomers shaped North American Jewry as we know it. It ended with the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Jewish philanthropists, like the Baron Hirsch, were actively involved in settling Jews in remote places such as Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan and New Jersey. But during those eight decades of massive Jewish immigration to North America only a handful of Jews came to the Holy land, including my own family, the Aronoff's, who settled in Jerusalem in 1874. The idea of establishing a national movement for the Jewish people

was not embraced by the overwhelming majority of Jews. Driven by religious fervor or by ideological and entrepreneurial zeal, and in some cases by both, those handful of pioneers acted against all odds. Their stunning victory was achieved thanks to their pragmatism and creativity.



Israeli art by Daniel Tchetchick in Times Square (Courtesy of Charney Media; Credit: Daniel Tchetchick)

Today, the State of Israel is home to the world's largest Jewish community. Jewish life, although not strife-free, is blossoming. The modern State of Israel is a bastion of creativity and innovation. Israel's universities are consistently ranked in the top and ideas originating from Israel, or by Israelis, are considered hot commodity worldwide. Israeli content is welcomed and celebrated in Hollywood. Israel sends the third largest contingent to NASDAQ. A country that started with fewer than 600K residents in 1948 is projected to reach the 17M mark by 2048. All components to assure a bright future are in place.

Zionism has never been more accepted among American Jews (although the majority of North American Jews are still disconnected from Israel or Jewish life) and a new generation of young Jews is emerging.

Unlike their ancestors, they see Israel as a place of opportunity and not just as a place plagued by seemingly insurmountable problems. This paradigm shift, from 'Israel the problem' to 'Israel the opportunity' can be largely attributed to their attraction to Israel's creative spirit. Experiential programs, such as Birthright, Masa, JNF's Muss Highschool, iTrek and many similar programs, allow young people to experience Israel firsthand. A prominent American broadcaster said after visiting Israel: "If given a chance — Israel could sell itself." Nothing is stronger than experiencing the place.

Here's another fact noticed by the leaders of the Gulf region: Israel has never been more accepted geo-politically and never enjoyed a higher level of international legitimacy. Post 9/11, Israel has been experiencing an unprecedented level of intimacy with the world's greatest powers: The United States, China, India, Russia, Brazil, Canada, Great Britain, Nigeria, Australia, United Kingdom, Germany and many more.

Indeed, in some intellectual circles, Israel's very legitimacy is still being doubted. But contrary to the subjective feeling of many North American Jews, Israel is not being boycotted. On the contrary, as these normalization agreements prove. Israel's creative spirit is being celebrated globally, even in the Arab world. As for those chronically critical intellectuals — they never endorsed Zionism, yet the movement thrived and over-achieved without them. Oslo was not good enough for them and so are the normalization agreements.



New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg marking the establishment of Cornell University's joint campus with Israel's Technion on Roosevelt Island in 2013 (Credit: New York City Hall)

Shimshon der Nebbish (Samson the Clumsy) is a profound Yiddish term attributed to Israel's third Prime Minister Levi Eshkol. It reflects Israel's impossible state of mind: being a 'victor' and a 'victim' at the same time. Understandably, victimhood awareness was an essential driver in Zionism's pre-statehood achievements. But for far too long, Israel's leaders confused the world, and their constituents, with this dual-meaning message. One cannot passionately discuss Israel's looming annihilation and expect investors to rush in. Israel's political leadership could help Israel's business, academia and culture by adopting a more cohesive strategy that centers around the country's competitive advantages, chiefly its creative spirit. It seems that not only the Israelis themselves are beginning to recognize and celebrate these competitive advantages, but that its Arab neighbors are beginning to do so as well.

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