



We Believe

The Israeli Center





Jewish-Democratic. Fundamental, isn't it?

If there is one thing almost universally agreed upon in Israel, it is that the state is built on two principles: it is both the nation state of the Jewish people, and a democratic state that guarantees individual liberties and rights to all its citizens. Neither more democratic than Jewish nor more Jewish than democratic. But this idea been significant diluted in recent years, a trend led by the political and ideological right and left. At one end of the spectrum, the right tends to emphasize a religious-halachic identity at the expense of humanistic and liberal values as part of a political and social alliance with the ultra-Orthodox and Hardal (religious Zionist-ultra-Orthodox) public. At the other end, the left tends to emphasize humanistic or civil-democratic values at the expense of Jewish and national identity as part of a political and civil alliance with the Arab public.

As a result, the centrist ethos that has guided the state from the early days of Zionism – the special balance between Israel's resolutely democratic character and its role as the nation state of the Jewish people, with Zionist-Jewish characteristics and a unique Jewish nature – is cracking under the strain. The Zionist majority is split, weakening its ability to stand up to the worrying trends afflicting many countries in the Western world: nationalist radicalization, internal security threats, post-nationalism (and post-Zionism), cost of living, lack of equal opportunity, over-sectorialism, tribalist and divisive discourse, political corruption and the erosion of trust in state institutions.

We are losing our Jewish identity, and we are in danger of losing our democratic identity at the same time. The recent developments in Israeli politics are widening the rift, and they put issues connected to Judaism in the hands of politicians who advocate a narrow and aggressive view of Judaism and its nature, and issues connected to democracy in the hands of politicians who identify democracy only through the narrow lens of "majority rule." However, Jewish identity is not measured by giving extra privileges to the ultra-Orthodox, not with steps to reduce Judaism to halachic religion only and certainly not through religious coercion. On the contrary: These distance many from the

rich cultural Jewish world and create a backlash against Judaism. On the other hand, democracy is not measured only by “governance” and the power of the majority. Democracy is also made up of separation of powers; checks and balances; liberty, brotherhood and equality; and the protection of individual and minority rights.

This paper proposes a basic analysis of the challenges of life in Israel alongside a definition of a centrist vision for the State of Israel and a breakdown of the center’s values and methodological tools.

Challenges of Life in Israel

To summarize in just a few words: “lack of social cohesion” and “lack of governance.” These two definitions neatly sum up the two major crises facing Israeli society today. They are Israeli society’s “preexisting conditions,” and unless we give them serious and in-depth treatment – we will not find any solution to the malaise.

The social cohesion crisis is the absence of a baseline Israeli consensus, which prevents the various constituent parts of Israeli society from working together to address our social and national challenges.

We think in a tribal paradigm; elevate our own sectors; and live in a reality afflicted by fear of our neighbors from other tribes. The lack of trust between people and the absence of a shared story has seeped upward into the systems of government that maintain and are even fed by the divisive and sectoral discourse. The different groups are unable to unite under a common cause; every move is suspected to be motivated by sectoral rather than national interests, and thus the social cohesion crisis intensifies the governance crisis.

The governance crisis is the gulf between the size and complexity of the challenges facing the state and the ability of the state’s institutions and governing figures to tackle them successfully.

Of late it has been common to interpret governance in the political discourse as the capacity to enforce policy and exercise power. But in practice, governance is measured on a much broader plane: by the capacity of the state to optimize systems, create effective solutions, lead necessary reform and improve the situation on the ground. The failure of the right and the left to provide solutions for everyday problems leads them to blame one another, and thus the governance crisis exacerbates the social cohesion crisis.

There is no magic solution for either of these crises. Neither a clever campaign nor a charismatic leader will bring about a solution. What is required is an in-depth and long-term process of fusion, therapy and healing – of creating a shared vision and engaging narrative that guides us toward addressing these crises methodically to ensure Israel's future.

It must be stressed that the preoccupation with governance and social cohesion is not a way of avoiding “life or death” issues such as security, education, economy and religion and state. On the contrary – without addressing the challenges of governance and social cohesion, which impede the state's “operating system”, we will not be able to solve even one of our problems as a society. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the cost-of-living crisis, adapting the education system to the 21st century, encoding the relationship between religion and state, bridging the gap between Israel's geographical center and the periphery – all these important challenges will remain frozen without progress in governance and social cohesion.

The Vision

- 🌀 A Unifying Israeli Narrative
- 📖 Effective and established ground rules

So what is our narrative? A narrative of roots. A Zionist narrative. National. Liberal.

Our starting point is that the State of Israel is the national home of the Jewish people and a liberal democracy in which all citizens are equal. Israel was founded in the spirit of the values of Zionism and on the unity of Israel and love for the land, but also on democratic values that guarantee the rights and liberties of every person, irrespective of religion, race or gender. Many talented people before us have tried to write the “shared Israeli narrative,” but even the most beautiful words were not enough to transform vision into reality. In light of the failures of the past, we must ask what we have in our power to do differently. We must not give up on the narrative – but we must change the process of writing it.

Every story has a hero, and the heroes of the Israeli story are Israelis. Jews and Arabs; longtime citizens and new immigrants; center and periphery; secular, traditional, religious and ultra-Orthodox people; Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Ethiopians and people from the former Soviet Union. And as in any good story, finding the answer starts by looking at the characters, the relationships between them, and – most importantly – recognizing the desire of each to be the one who dictates the tone.

The diversity of Israeli society, which is also the secret to its strength, is what will write the Israeli story. The citizens of Israel and the different tribes they belong to will determine our values as a Jewish-Democratic country, what brings us to this land, and the country we wish to pass on to our children.

To write the shared Israeli narrative – which is the first order of the day in resolving the social cohesion crisis – it is imperative to create established, clear and fair “ground rules,” which formalize the Israeli democracy’s mode of operation: how we make decisions, how we pass laws, who makes policy, when the court intervenes, the division of responsibility between central and local governments, and the role of the professional civil service. Without ground rules, we live in a jungle in which every man is for himself. The absence of these rules is one of the reasons for the deepening crisis of confidence between the people and the government, between different authorities, and – perhaps worst of all – between citizens.

The role of the ground rules is not only to facilitate the creation of the Israeli narrative, but also to minimize the tribalist, populist and instinctive discourse and move from a

zero-sum approach to a more complex way of thinking, one that encourages solutions that balance the different values that are common in Israel's heterogenous society.

What does the center believe in? Values of the center

Every ideology has values, and the center is no exception. As an abstract ideology and an independent political camp, the center stands on five main values.

⊠ **Liberal, Jewish and Democratic Nationalism**

For many, this combination is an oxymoron. Nationalism reflects a closed community rooted in a shared origin, language, history, leaders and culture. Liberalism, on the other hand, sanctifies individual liberties and the ability to choose freely without coercion or intervention. Nationalism is collective, liberalism is individualistic; nationalism draws meaning from the past, while liberal looks toward the future.

Collective identity and national pride are important, but so is liberty. On this matter too, the center refuses to participate in the "either/or" game of public discourse that seeks to decide between the two. The modern democratic state could not have developed without nationalism, whose main mission is the actualization of a people in their homeland; and individual liberty and the aspiration to equality could not have developed without nation states, which have institutions, armies and police forces that protect individual liberties. On the other hand, national identity and life that draws meaning from this identity can exist only in a country that protects individual liberties, and coercion causes division and hatred.

The center is a national-liberal ideology. Nationalism that constitutes a source of pride, solidarity and a shared future – but is not predatory or exclusionary. Liberalism that celebrates individual liberties and the individual's right to live their life as they please, but doesn't erase national identification and tribal identities along the way.

On the basis of the value of liberal nationalism, one of our important principles as an Israeli center is emphasizing that the State of Israel is a Jewish and democratic state and maintaining the balance between the two sides of the equation: It is the nation state of the Jewish people, which protects not only its physical but also its spiritual existence, and in which it develops and cultivates its culture and seeks to fulfill its historic destiny: to be a model for a life of brotherhood and justice. And at the same time, it is a country that sanctifies individual freedoms, where all citizens are equal and can live their lives as free people however they wish and pursue their personal

happiness. Neither more democratic than Jewish nor less. Jewish-democratic in one word.

Israel First (“Statism 2.0”)

Statism is a concept associated above all with the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion. Statism was his way of addressing the challenges Israel faced in its early days, against a backdrop of disagreement and differences of opinion between the different Zionist factions. The Jewish people has always been characterized by arguments; but to establish a home for the Jewish people, agreement, unity and non-partisanship were required. Statism

called for all the citizens and sectors to place the greater national interest above sectoral and partisan interests. The different state institutions were founded in the name of statism, and were required to place the state at the top of their list of priorities.

It is important to recognize that statism came at a heavy cost. Every group in the nascent Israeli society paid a price with its identity and welfare – some more and some less. Voices were silenced, traditions were cast aside, entire populations were scattered, and names were even changed under duress. In recent decades, Israel has gone from being a “melting pot” to being a pluralistic, diverse, and multi-cultural society – an important and welcome development, but each tribe being pulled its own sectoral interests has exacerbated tribalism and eroded unity.

The center recognizes that on one hand, we must put the interests of the country first and work toward a safe and prosperous Jewish and democratic Israel; and on the other hand we must protect the rights of the different groups in society to preserve their traditions, live according to their values and be educated in their own way. Accordingly, the center’s leading value is “Israel first,” placing Israel before the political camp: prioritizing the country while recognizing and exalting the rights of sectors and communities to maintain their lifestyles. Israel before the camp, but not instead of the camp.

Statism in this form comes from a broad, Israel-wide approach to public life as a whole. The state and its institutions are the center of gravity of national life. Therefore, the center rejects fanaticism, extremism, factionalism and hatred, and celebrates the rights of each community and sector in Israel to preserve its unique identity. Statism according to the “Israel first” model not only accepts the existence of tribes and sectors, it includes them and is /composed of them – each group and tribe is represented in Israeli statism and the shared Israeli narrative.

“Israel first” is not simply the common good, and certainly not avoiding making decisions. Decisions must be made, and for many there will not be consensus – but seeing things through the prism of “Israel first” accepts that this is not only a question of what, but also of how. How decisions are made, who is involved in making them, and what considerations are taken into account when they are made.

Practicality

As Israelis, we were educated to surrender to grand ideologies, such that define our identity: “Greater Israel,” “Peace Now,” “‘new’ is forbidden by the Torah,” the “people's army,” “separation of religion and state,” and more. But ideologies were designed to be symbols and values, not work plans; and they cannot be realized in their purist form, as the violence of the 20th century taught us. In order to sustain and run Israel with its existing demographic, the country needs a pragmatic approach. The center turns ideological principles, which exist only in abstract form as a vision, to something practical in the real world.

None of the values we know can be disconnected from life itself, but they must also include its expression in the real world – which inevitably tempers it. The pragmatic philosophy upon which the center is based claims that the level of morality and truth of policies and decisions depends not just on abstract theories but primarily on their degree of success in practice.

Put simply, the center is committed to “the real world”. The center looks at societal problems through an ideological lens, but does not allow its ideology to immobilize it, and holds a realistic lens alongside the ideological one. The connection between the two is what allows the center to promote practicable, productive and effective solutions without neglecting its values.

The “Both/And” Principle

Every individual and society holds a long list of values, and these values can inevitably come into conflict or even contradict one another. The value of equality sometimes contradicts the value of liberty; purity of arms sometimes contradicts personal security; Judaism often conflicts with democracy.

In the life of a country where different groups holding many different and important values live side by side, the ability to simultaneously hold all of them even when tension arises becomes even more important.

The center champions the approach that the state must choose a “both/and” approach, not a struggle aimed at “either/or”. We believe that the state must hold multiple values, even when they are seemingly incompatible, and not allow the subjugation of one value or another, certainly not in a heterogeneous and diverse country like Israel.

This isn’t a compromise or a “middle ground,” but finding a specific balance in a way that allows us to not relinquish any principle – similar to the traditional way of thinking. It is actually a selected point of balance between two important values that will allow us to not compromise on any one of those principles, and to hold them all simultaneously. It affords us intellectual flexibility, agreement and acceptance, and especially ending the political standstill and mudslinging that dooms us to dichotomous thinking.

Free and Fair Economy

Unlike the neoliberal capitalism which preaches every man for himself, the center advocates for a free market in which people are friends and family. There is no format of equal and uniform distribution between friends and family. Disparities in background, talent and luck can create legitimate differences in wealth. One might be richer than a brother, or more established than a friend, without any injustice.

However, friends and family are sensitive to each other’s distress. On the societal level, this sensitivity is translated into taking responsibility, which will ensure that despite inequality, no one is left behind.

There is no debate about the advantages of the free market; but alongside free market economics that enable growth and individual initiative, the center advocates for social mobility and ensuring equal opportunity, while understanding that free competition must be fair competition: fighting centralization and ensuring equal access to opportunities and high-quality social services.

How does the center think? Our toolkit

The thinking of the center stands on the five principles we detailed. To build a stable world based on them, we also need to develop the right practical tools. What toolkit do we seek to use to rectify the current situation?

20:30:50

In light of the “Israel first” approach, we suggest adopting the following way of thinking for every issue surrounding policy, responsibility, budgets and legislation: preserving the baseline national ethos, responsibility and authority at the national-state level (50%), while gradually delegating responsibility and authority to local authorities or sectors (30%) and to communities and individuals (20%).

We consider this to be the correct balance of state, tribe and community. A balance that preserves the baseline unifying, shared national narrative while also recognizing the importance of preserving sectoral and community identity. In each government action and area of public life, the national component will be dominant (50%), but the values and needs of different identity groups will be recognized at the same time, and a significant portion of the decision-making and budgets will be delegated to the level of communities, neighborhoods and local organizations. This approach to statism is the right approach to shape Israeli life in the 21st century.

For example, the education system will teach 50% shared curriculums to all students in Israel across denominations, 30% sectoral curriculums for the different groups to choose, and 20% of the education budget will go to principals or parents’ committees, who may choose educational content for their own students and children .

The Continuum Principle

When the center approaches ideological or practical issues, it avoids binary thinking that creates “yes/no” answers and “either/or” thinking. The center solves problems using the continuum principle: Instead of approaching policy issues with the question of “this or that?”, the center approaches them with the question of “to what extent”? And when we ask “to what extent?” our whole perspective changes.

For example, instead of asking “Should we allow abortions?” We ask “At what stage, under what conditions, and what entity makes the decision?” Instead of asking “Can the court exercise judicial review over the Knesset?” We ask “For which issues, under what conditions, and with which court proceeding can it exercise judicial review?” The answer

can range from the minimum to the maximum, but even formulating the question according to the continuum principle changes the nature of the discussion.

Only through a lens of quantitative continuity can we reach creative solutions that consider and balance the tensions that exist. Yes/no questions will not serve us here. And no, this isn't moral relativism. Not all values carry equal weight and not every perception of good is acceptable. There are red lines and actions and ideas that are beyond the pale. But usually, the debates Israeli society grapples with involve legitimate if competing conceptions of good; and in a heterogeneous society, it is important to use a tool that gives space to both.

✧ **Reducing the Conflict(s)**

In many issues that bother us all, such as religion and state, security issues, or societal and economic rifts, we propose first and foremost to reduce the conflict and not necessarily reach a complete solution.

This approach relies on a realistic understanding by which – without compromising on solving the conflict – there is also value in partial and temporary solutions that are generally support by the public, even if they don't agree ideologically on the solution but only on the concrete steps taken. This is an important practical tool that is necessary within Israeli society; a tool that honors all the different groups, alongside a firm statement: Sometimes a decision can be reached even without agreeing on the overall vision – but also without conceding it completely.

We took the concept of “reducing conflict” from Dr. Micah Goodman's book “Catch-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War,” about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and expanded it to apply to additional political conflicts in which we are trapped. We believe that often, the right way to solve these issues is gradually and incrementally. Thus, most of our proposals do not necessarily try to solve the problem, but rather to reduce the tensions that exist and break the issue down into small and solvable problems – without constantly waving the ideological dispute about the ultimate vision for the character of the country.

Inter-sectoral Synergy

Inter-sectoral synergy is a work tool that implements the “Both/And” principle on the different sectors that can work together. Combining the strengths and actions of different sectors, organizations and groups in Israeli society, which together create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

When addressing policy issues and national challenges, we believe it is necessary to take the government's ethos, responsibility, commitment and deep pockets, and combine these elements with the private market's efficiency and flexibility and with social organizations' expertise and familiarity with the needs of the people. It is important to stress that this does not mean ideological synergy between all organizations and groups, but rather emphasizing diversity and increasing national responsibility among Israel's different demographics and groups in both the private and public sectors.

It is the creation of an Israeli public norm by which representatives of the different professional sectors are invited to any table that is working on solving a problem. In this way, government ministries, local authorities and civil society organizations can benefit from the deep involvement of the business, tech and academic sectors for addressing complex issues.

Trust and Empathy

Without trust and the capacity to empathize with the Other, it is impossible to reach agreement on national ground rules, the distribution of resources and the way decisions are made. The center approaches each challenge with the understanding that the first step is listening to and learning the different voices and arguments, and with a willingness to try to understand the different perspectives, identities and interests, and recognizing that political rivals are not enemies. The center doesn't ignore disputes, but solves problems without railroading its rivals, in an attempt to create trust and cooperation and with the goal of improving the result for as many Israelis as possible.

This way of thinking draws from traditionalism and reflects the value of preserving the "togetherness" of a people with a rich and storied past and a common future, but without obscuring ideological differences: Political rivals may have ideological quarrels, but remain patriotic and committed Israelis.

The center's values are lofty; its tools are grounded in the everyday. They are practical, useful and accessible, and the center makes frequent use of them when approaching the challenges it faces.