
The rift between a beleaguered prime minister and a grieving novelist mirrors the division confounding Israel. Can the two men overcome the differences that separate them? Can Israel overcome its paralysis to make the hard choice necessary for its survival as a Jewish democracy?

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Unforgiven

In early August of 2006, four weeks after the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, which has as its goal the physical elimination of Israel (and the ancillary ambition of murdering, whenever practicable, Jews elsewhere in the world), killed three Israeli soldiers and kidnapped two more in a cross-border raid, Israel found itself in an exceedingly disagreeable position. The Hezbollah attack had prompted an immediate, and intermittently unrestrained, Israeli military response, which included thousands of bombing runs over Lebanon. The prime minister, the untried Ehud Olmert, a former mayor of Jerusalem who had taken office eight months earlier, promised to obliterate Hezbollah. In the past, Israel had destroyed far greater enemies—the Syrian air force, the Egyptian army, the Arab Legion—so it was assumed that Israel would make short work of Hezbollah, a force consisting of, at most, a few thousand fighters in possession of 12,000 short-range rockets. But within days of Israel's initial attack, it seemed obvious that the Olmert mission was in peril. The Israeli bombardment of Lebanon, which had resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Hezbollah members and innocent civilians, could not stop Hezbollah's rockets from falling on northern Israel. These rocket attacks had killed dozens of Israelis—Arab Israelis included—and had made the Galilee largely uninhabitable. Thousands of Israelis became refugees in their own country, fleeing south in search of shelter.

On August 9, Olmert's cabinet authorized a full-scale ground invasion. Israeli troops were already operating inside Lebanon, but in relatively modest numbers. The generals believed that an armored sweep across southern Lebanon could at least push Hezbollah's rocket teams back to the Litani River, well away from the Israeli border.

At the outset of the conflict, in July, Israelis had stood united with Olmert against Hezbollah. Israel's endless confrontation with the Palestinians is shaded with ambiguities; many Israelis wish to see a Palestinian state come into being in the West Bank and in Gaza, even as they doubt that such a state would bring an end to terrorism. With Hezbollah, there are fewer grays. Its

sponsor, Iran, poses the most immediate threat to Israel's physical existence; many of its leaders are plainly anti-Semitic. Iran's president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a Holocaust denier who has called Israel a "filthy bacteria." Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, has said in a speech, "If we searched the entire world for a person more cowardly, despicable, weak and feeble in psyche, mind, ideology and religion, we would not find anyone like the Jew. Notice, I do not say the Israeli."

Because the Hezbollah attack was unprovoked, much of the world had initially expressed sympathy for Israel. This took Israelis by surprise; it had been more than 40 years since they generally received such consideration from the international community. Even Sunni Arab leaders, who fear Shiite radicalism more than they dislike the Jewish state, expressed irritation with Hezbollah.

By early August, though, opinion was shifting, and the decision to launch a ground invasion just when credible cease-fire proposals were proliferating was controversial around the world, and even at home. This was at least partly because Olmert, a lawyer and party functionary, and his defense minister, a former union leader named Amir Peretz, seemed to be in over their heads. Their actions convinced some Israelis—particularly those on the left—that the decision to order a ground invasion revealed a kind of unthinking aggressiveness.

On Thursday, August 10, the day after Olmert's cabinet authorized the invasion, Israel's three most prominent writers, Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and David Grossman, held a press conference to call for a cease-fire. This was not an entirely marginal exercise. Writers in Israel play a role in the moral and political life of their country that is unfamiliar to writers in the United States. The three men were not reflexively biased against Olmert, who, unlike his main political rival, the former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was something of a born-again leftist. Olmert had once been a prince of the right-wing Likud Party. But, like his mentor and predecessor, Ariel Sharon, Olmert had come to believe that a withdrawal from Palestinian territory was in the urgent best interest of Israel.

Olmert's main consideration was not moral but demographic: within the next several years, the number of Arabs under Israeli control—there are now more than 1.3 million Arab citizens of Israel (there are 5.4 million Jews), and an additional 3.4 million or more Arabs who live in the West Bank and Gaza—will be greater than the number of Jews. The Israeli demographer Sergio DellaPergola estimates that by 2020, Jews will make up just 47 percent of the people who live between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

Political parties of the left and the center see the "demographic threat" to Israel's Jewish majority as an existential menace nearly on a par with that posed by Iran and its nuclear program. The demographic trend has raised fears that Israel will become a state like pre-Mandela South Africa, in which the

minority ruled the majority. But if the Arabs of the West Bank and Gaza were given the vote, then Israel, a country whose fundamental purpose has been to serve as a refuge for persecuted Jews, and to allow those Jews to have the novel experience of being part of a majority, would disappear, to be replaced by an Arab-dominated “binational” state. Yet Israel has not found a way to escape the West Bank.

Unlike Olmert, the three writers had been longtime advocates of territorial compromise with the Palestinians, in part for reasons of morality, and in part because they want to protect their country’s Jewish majority. In the days of near-hallucinatory ecstasy that followed Israel’s lopsided victory in the Six-Day War of 1967—in which Israel took possession of Gaza and the West Bank—Oz was one of the first Israelis to warn about the moral and strategic consequences of military occupation, and in the late 1970s he was a founder of the left-wing group Peace Now, which advocates Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. Yehoshua, who has been called the “Israeli Faulkner” by Harold Bloom, has repeatedly urged the United States to pull its ambassador as a “symbolic” way to protest the expansion of settlements in the West Bank.

Grossman’s fiction, much of it haunted by the Holocaust, concerns the durability of grief; his most accomplished novel to date, *See Under: Love* (1986), is a complicated weaving of fantasy and reality that recalls the work of Gabriel García Márquez. Grossman has been preoccupied with the ubiquity of death in the lives of Israelis and Palestinians for many years. Nearly a decade ago, he told an interviewer that Israeli couples “have three children so if one of them dies, there will be two left.” Grossman made his name internationally with a book of nonfiction prophecy, *The Yellow Wind*, which he wrote (originally for an Israeli newsmagazine) in early 1987. *The Yellow Wind* was an exposé of the occupation and its demoralizing effects on Palestinians, and on the Israelis who enforced it. The book presaged the first intifada, or uprising, which began in December of that year.

Though all three authors were advocates of compromise and believed that Israel’s settlement enterprise in the West Bank was a catastrophe, none was a pacifist, all were patriots, and all supported the initial retaliation against Hezbollah. “It would have been immoral not to respond,” Yehoshua told me later, but after the Lebanese government promised to rein in Hezbollah, “we had to say ‘Enough.’” Grossman did much of the speaking at the press conference that day. His main contention was that Israel had overreached in the pursuit of self-defense. “The argument that an Israeli presence on the Litani would prevent the firing of missiles on Israel is an illusion,” he said. “Even the argument that we mustn’t give Hezbollah a sense of security has been irrelevant for a long time. Hezbollah wishes to see us sink deeper into the Lebanese swamp.”

Grossman saw in Olmert’s invasion what he called an emblematic, and regrettable, Israeli response to terrorist threats, of a piece with Israel’s typical

response to dangers posed by Hamas in Gaza. “Now we must look ... not to the familiar, instinctive reaction of the Israeli way of fighting—that is, what doesn’t work with force will work with much more force,” he said. “Force, in this case, will fan the flames of hatred for Israel in the region and the entire world, and may even, heaven forbid, create the situation that will bring upon us the next war and push the Middle East to an all-out, regional war.”

Grossman closed the press conference without mentioning his personal interest in the war: his 20-year-old son, Uri, was a tank commander then fighting in Lebanon. To do so would have been unseemly, and un-Israeli, he told me later. “The cause was to stop the war for the sake of the entire country.”

Grossman is 54, but he is trim and his face is unlined. He is reflective and self-contained, somewhat owl-like, but not without humor. We met on a cold day in Jerusalem, at Mishkenot Sha’ananim, an artists’ colony situated across the Valley of Hinnom from Mount Zion.

Grossman told me that after the press conference, he went home to work on his latest novel, which he had begun in May of 2003, when Uri, the second of his three children, was about to be called up for army service. Grossman’s oldest boy, Yonatan, had already completed three years in the army.

“I thought about writing a novel about an Israeli soldier, a tank commander, who goes to a big military operation,” he said. “His mother has a kind of premonition that he’s going to be killed, and she will do everything she can in order to prevent that from happening. So she escapes. She will not be at home when the army comes to announce the death of her son. She understands that bad news takes two people, one to deliver and one to receive, and she will not be there to receive. She starts a walk across Israel, a 500-kilometer walk, and she tells the story of her son’s life, from the smallest details to the largest things, to someone who is very significant to her. She believes that this will protect her son.”

Grossman himself took a similar journey while writing the book, spending weeks crossing Israel on foot, and he visited with army officers whose duty it is to inform families of the deaths of their children.

At 2:40 a.m. on Sunday, August 13, three days after the press conference, Grossman’s doorbell rang. There were officers at the door. Uri had been killed in action in Lebanon, in the village of Hirbat Kasif, when a Hezbollah missile struck his tank. He was one of 24 soldiers to die on the first day of the ground offensive. Five hours later, David and his wife, Michal, woke up Uri’s sister, Ruti, who was then 13. As she cried, she asked, “But we will still go on living, right?”

Yehoshua, who is close to the family, told me that the Grossmans had taken to turning off their outside light at night, to make it more difficult for a messenger to find the house. But on that particular night, Michal had turned their outside light on. She later worried, she said, that in so doing she had “invited the terrible news.”

Among the mourners to visit the next day were Oz and Yehoshua. “Maybe he was trying to prevent Uri’s death by writing down his most terrible fears,” Yehoshua told me. “It’s a terrible tragedy that it didn’t work.”

Grossman recalled the visit of Oz and Yehoshua the day after Uri’s death.

“When Uri fell, the morning after, they came to the shivah”—the period of visitation and mourning that follows a Jewish burial—“and I told them I won’t be able to save this novel. I think it was Amos who said, ‘The novel will save you.’ The day after the shivah, I went back and started to work again.” I asked Grossman whether the novel has changed. “The writer changed, not the story. I knew how the story was going to end. I don’t want to say it.” There is more sadness in the book now, he said, “sadness for the fate of the young man, for the future of Israel, but I must say that the small number of people who have read it say they find it comforting.”

The novel is being published this spring. It could have a seismic effect on Israelis, who have, in their 60th year of independence, grown tired of losing their sons to war.

The death of Uri has made his father, a man obviously vulnerable to existential worry, preternaturally aware of the insecurity around him. The 60th anniversary of Israel’s birth—it gained independence on May 15, 1948—is meant to be a celebration, but Grossman sees darkness ahead. “Our army is big, we have this atom bomb, but the inner feeling is of absolute fragility, that all the time we are at the edge of the abyss.”

Israelis have violently contradictory feelings about their future. Their country is, by almost any measure, an astonishing success. It has a large, sophisticated, and growing economy (its gross domestic product last year was \$150 billion); the finest universities and medical centers in the Middle East; and a main city, Tel Aviv, that is a center of art, fashion, cuisine, and high culture spread along a beautiful Mediterranean beach. Israel has shown itself, with notable exceptions, to be adept at self-defense, and capable (albeit imperfectly) of protecting civil liberties during wartime. It has become a worldwide center of Jewish learning and self-expression; its strength has straightened the spines of Jews around the world; and, most consequentially, it has absorbed and enfranchised millions of

previously impoverished and dispossessed Jews. Zionism may actually be the most successful national liberation movement of the 20th century.

Yet 60 years of independence have not provided Israel with legitimacy in its own region. Two of its neighbors, Egypt and Jordan, have signed peace treaties with Israel, but it is still a small Jewish island in a great sea of Islam, a religion that seems today more allergic than ever to the idea of Jewish independence. Iran poses the most ruthless threat to Israel's existence—no other member of the United Nations has so insistently, and in such baroque terms, threatened the destruction of another member state.

The internal threats to Israel's existence are severe as well. Israel's greatest military victory, in 1967, led to a squalid and seemingly endless occupation, and to the birth of a mystical, antidemocratic, and revanchist strain of Zionism, made manifest in the settlements of the West Bank. These settlements have undermined Israel's international legitimacy and demoralized moderate Palestinians. The settlers exist far outside the Israeli political consensus, and their presence will likely help incite a third intifada. Yet the country seems unable to confront the settlements.

Israel's people are among the world's most patriotic—in a recent survey, 94 percent of Jewish Israelis said they are willing to fight for their country (by contrast, 63 percent of Americans are willing to fight for theirs), but 44 percent of Israelis said they would be ready to leave their country if they could find a better standard of living abroad. There are already up to 40,000 Israelis in Silicon Valley (and more than a half million across the U.S.), and the emigration of Israel's most talented citizens is a constant worry of Israeli leaders. "Jews know that they can land on their feet in any corner of the world," Ehud Barak, the defense minister and former prime minister, told me. "The real test for us is to make Israel such an attractive place—cutting-edge in science, education, culture, quality of life—that even American Jewish young people want to come here. If we cannot do this, even those who were born here will consciously decide to go to other places. This is a real problem."

There are other, more disturbing issues, ones that many Israelis don't care to address. Uri Grossman's death provoked in me all sorts of questions about Israel, its purpose, its mistakes and enemies: How can Israel survive the next 60 years in a part of the world that gives rise to groups like Hamas? How can Israel flourish if its army cannot defeat small bands of rocketeers? Does the concentration of so many Jews in a claustrophobically small space in the world's most volatile region actually undermine the Jewish people's ability to survive, an ability that was called into question little more than 60 years ago, when 33 percent of the world's Jews were murdered? I do not think it is merely a symptom of Jewish hypochondria to ask such questions.

Some of the questions forming in my mind were too indecent to ask a grieving father like David Grossman. But I asked him whether he believed that Zionism has succeeded in its mission. I framed the question impersonally, though I had been struck by what to me was an inescapable truth: if Uri Grossman had been born to Jews in America, rather than to Jews in Israel, in 2006 he most likely would have been a student at Harvard or Michigan or Stanford, rather than a commander in the Armored Corps of the Israel Defense Forces. The underlying premise of the creation of the state of Israel—its main mission—was to provide a refuge for the Jewish people in their historic homeland. One of the many contradictions Israel faces in its seventh decade of independence is this: it is a country that is safe for Judaism, but not for Jews.

As a young Zionist in the late 1980s, I was drawn to the idea that Israel represented the most sublime and encompassing expression of Jewishness, so I moved there and joined its army. This decision was unfathomable to many of my new Israeli comrades. One of my commanders asked me, “Why would a person leave America to die in Israel?” Then he asked if we could switch places—he would move to New York and marry a doctor’s daughter, and I would die chasing Palestinians through the casbah of Nablus. I was dreaming Leon Uris dreams, but he was having visions out of *Goodbye, Columbus*.

I didn’t die, obviously, but his argument bothered me, and still does. The founders of Zionism believed that a state for the Jews would cure—or at least make irrelevant—the ancient European disease of Jew hatred. Remove the Jew from his insalubrious and constricted life in anti-Semitic Russia and give him a plow in Palestine, and he would become a “normal” person, deserving, among other things, the respect of Christians. The first Zionists had no sense that Muslims would object to the entry of thousands of Jewish socialists—women wearing pants included—into tribal, conservative Palestine. In his utopian novel, *Altneuland—Old-New Land*—the founder of political Zionism, Theodor Herzl, imagined an Israel much like Vienna, a society of opera-going, German-speaking Jews who had shed their “pale, weak, timid” natures. Herzl did not imagine a Palestine free of Arabs, though he imagined the Arabs overjoyed by the gifts of science and hygiene brought by the Jews. The principal Arab protagonist, Reschid Bey, says: “The Jews have enriched us. Why should we be angry with them? They dwell among us like brothers. Why should we not love them?”

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, was not unaware of Arab hostility to the goals of Zionism. In a 1934 meeting with the Arab leader Musa Alami, Ben-Gurion said that Zionism would “bring a blessing to the Arabs of Palestine, and they have no good cause to oppose us.” Alami responded, “I would prefer that the country remain impoverished and barren for another hundred years, until we ourselves are able to develop it on our own.” But Ben-Gurion believed that numbers would bring the cure. He said in 1933, “In the

course of four to five years we must bring in a quarter of a million Jews and the Arab question will be solved.”

Arab opposition did not die; it hardened. This opposition has, of course, gotten the Palestinians nothing; theirs is perhaps the least successful national liberation movement of the 20th century. But failure has not diminished the desire of many Muslims to see the end of Israel, and the ultimate success of the Zionist idea depends not only on Israel’s ability to keep its citizens alive but on its ability to end talk of its impermanence.

“I think that this fear, this idea that Israel will not exist anymore—I cannot even utter specific, clear words because it’s really frightening—this idea or fear hovers above us all the time,” Grossman told me. “It is so present, even though we suppress it almost violently. Whenever it infiltrates the consciousness, it’s almost paralyzing. You can see if you look at the numbers—how few we are, how many they are, how hostile this region is, how we have never been accepted into this region.”

He continued: “If you see the tendencies of fanaticism, the way in which at every crossroads both sides almost always choose the more violent approach, if you see the fact that other religions, parts of the West, never really accept the idea of Israel ... It means something deep about us (and even more about everyone else), about Judaism and the state that we are still in, after 60 years of sovereignty—we have not accomplished statehood, the realization that this is a legitimate state. And we have a lack of confidence in our own existence. We also don’t really believe in our own existence. We have the formal symptoms of a normal state, but we still do not believe we are a state. Throughout history we were regarded, and we regarded ourselves, as a larger-than-life story, since the time of the Bible. We’re a story that other nations read and borrow. But if you are a story, you can end.”

Of course, America is *sui generis* in its acceptance of Jews, having brought them to the absolute center of its national life. This means that their story will come to an end not because of the actions of Iran, or of the Palestinians, but because they choose to end it, by assimilating completely.

I acknowledged to Grossman that, at a time of maximum distress, the late 1930s, America refused to admit thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing from Nazi terror (if Israel had been created in 1939, not 1948, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Jews could have been saved). But the Diaspora, and the American diaspora experience in particular, no longer represents a danger to physical Jewish existence. Grossman steered the conversation away from issues of mere physical security. Israel still gives a Jew the best chance of feeling at home in the world, he said.

“Maybe if you live in other places, you are integrated, you feel assimilated. I wouldn’t like to live in any other place. With all the difficulty and criticism I

have, it is still for me, as a Jewish person, the highest spiritual challenge and endeavor to see this country become a better place.”

Uri Grossman’s death became a national trauma amid the larger national trauma of the Lebanon misadventure. Grossman remained silent about the war, and about politics, from his son’s death, in August, until that November, when he addressed 100,000 Israelis at a memorial service for Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister assassinated in 1995 by an extremist supporter of the settlements. Olmert was on the stage as well; Grossman refused to shake hands with the prime minister, but he directed his words at him.

“The death of young people is a horrible, shattering waste,” he said. “But no less dreadful is the sense that for many years, the state of Israel has been squandering not only the lives of its children but also the miracle it experienced—the great and rare opportunity bestowed upon it by history, the opportunity to create an enlightened, decent, democratic state that would conduct itself according to Jewish and universal values. A state that would be a national home and a refuge, but not *only* a refuge; rather, a place that would also give new meaning to Jewish existence.”

He went on to criticize the country’s leaders, saying that they could not “help a nation adrift in such a complicated state of affairs.”

“Mr. Prime Minister, I am not saying these things out of anger or vengefulness. I have waited long enough so that I would not be responding from a fleeting impulse. You cannot dismiss my words tonight by saying that a man should not be judged at his time of grief. Of course I am in grief. But more than anger, what I feel is pain. This country pains me, and what you and your friends are doing to it. Believe me, your success is important to me, because the future of us all depends on your ability to get up and do something.”

Grossman then pleaded with Olmert to speak directly to the Palestinian people. He has argued that the flaw of the Oslo peace process of the 1990s was that the negotiators never spoke about the shape of a final agreement—including the shape of the future state of Palestine.

“Go to them over the head of Hamas,” Grossman said to Olmert. “Go to the moderates among them, the ones who, like me and you, oppose Hamas and its ways. Go to the Palestinian people. Speak to their deep grief and wounds, recognize their continued suffering. Your status will not be diminished, nor will that of Israel in any future negotiations. But people’s hearts will begin to open a little to one another, and this opening has huge power.”

Grossman told me that the self-created trap for Olmert is that he knows what needs to be done—leave the West Bank—but is powerless to do it. “I could give his speeches regarding peace,” Grossman said. “But when will he evacuate an outpost?” he asked, referring to newly built satellite enclaves outside existing settlements. “When will he speak to the hopes and fears of the Palestinians? When will he do something to save us?”

"David Grossman thinks that you haven't done enough to remove outposts and leave the West Bank," I told Olmert when I visited him a few weeks ago. The prime minister leaned back in his chair. His face took on a dark cast. "Listen," he said with evident irritation. "This is why I am prime minister and he is a writer."

Olmert sighed. "I'll tell you, I don't like to argue with David since he lost his son," he said. "I think there is an emotional part in the way he expresses himself about me, which has nothing to do with my views or my actions."

Olmert is a man of medium height and build, with a high forehead and large features, who thrusts his jaw out when he speaks. He saw me in his office at the government compound in Jerusalem. The compound is an armed fortress, and the prime minister's office is separated from the outside world by several layers of unforgiving security. Since the murder of Rabin, and especially since Israel began targeting Hamas leaders for assassination, the prime minister of Israel has become one of the world's most comprehensively guarded men.

The office itself is unadorned and windowless, narrow—a submarine. On the wall next to Olmert's desk hang portraits of various prime ministers, including Ariel Sharon and Menachem Begin. Two of his recent predecessors, Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak, are missing. Where are they? I asked.

"I could answer," Olmert said waspishly, "but I prefer not to."

Olmert is said to be capable of projecting kindness, and he has a talent for sycophancy (his speech welcoming President Bush to Israel earlier this year was particularly overripe). But he can be a haranguing, preemptively defensive man. I recently watched Olmert address a small group of American Jewish leaders, including some who, unlike the majority of American Jews, are dubious about Olmert's embrace of moderation, and his willingness to negotiate the future of Jerusalem. "I know everyone is very sensitive and very curious about Jerusalem," he said. "Sometimes when I hear people talking to me about Jerusalem, I say, 'Hey, excuse me, what exactly did you build in Jerusalem, that you are preaching to me? Who built more in Jerusalem and did more to protect the unity of the city of Jerusalem than any of those who are wasting lots of energies and spending a lot of money in order to try and overwhelm my

position?” (Olmert later told me that unnamed American Jews are “investing a lot of money trying to overthrow the government in Israel.”)

In the course of our conversation, I told Olmert I thought it wasn't entirely fair to discount Grossman's criticisms as being motivated by grief. The two men have been acquaintances for many years, and it is true that Grossman has refused to speak to Olmert since Uri's death. But Grossman today is critical of Olmert's approach to matters concerning the West Bank, and he has said that he would speak to Olmert, and even stand with him, if he believed that the prime minister was truly serious about taking the necessary steps toward reconciliation with the Palestinians.

The prime minister was doubtful. “He doesn't really separate the personal from the political,” Olmert said. “I have a lot of respect for David, but I think he's wrong. First of all, he's wrong; second, I don't like to argue with him.” Of the three writers who aligned against him over Lebanon, he said, “Amos Oz is the most realistic.”

When I told Oz that Olmert wouldn't address Grossman's critique, he said: “I don't think David Grossman is blinded by grief. Grief can be an eye-opener. He's a perfectly legitimate critic of the Olmert government.” Oz also rejected Olmert's effort to draft him to his team. “I support the peace process that began at Annapolis,” he said. “I don't necessarily support Olmert on what he's doing in Gaza,” referring to recent Israeli military incursions.

Olmert is more unpopular in Israel than George W. Bush is in the United States. His business dealings have repeatedly drawn the attention of the country's police and attorney general, and his reputation is that of an inauthentic, calculating man whose skills lie mainly in the area of self-advancement. The commission of inquiry appointed to investigate Israeli mistakes in Lebanon was caustic in its criticism of his leadership, finding that Olmert acted hastily and with arrogance in the rush to war. The report was even more critical of army and defense ministry leaders. It characterized the Lebanon invasion as heedless and jerry-rigged. The commission's findings were a reminder that, as the former Prime Minister Ehud Barak once told me, Jews excel at many things but not necessarily at self-rule. “The last two experiments of Jews running a political state were not great successes,” he said, referring to the Israel of King Solomon's time, which ultimately ended in the exile to Babylon, and to the Jewish commonwealth of the Second Temple period, which was conquered by the Romans, who scattered the Jews.

The purpose of my visit to Olmert's office was not to plumb his resentment-filled relationship with David Grossman but to discuss the meaning of Israel's existence. When I brought up the subject of existential threats, he recoiled. “When the leader of a nation of 75 million people with ballistic missiles, with modern weapons, with a declared desire to possess a nuclear capacity,

threatens Israel with annihilation, can I ignore it? Can I say I didn't hear it? Of course I can't."

Olmert was more comfortable speaking about the Zionist idea and praising Herzl's prophetic powers: few men understood at the start of the last century, as Herzl did, that Europe would soon turn against its Jews so absolutely. And he spoke of the achievements of Jewish independence—the ingathering of Jews, most especially—all of which were unassailably remarkable.

Then I asked him to discuss the flaws in the execution of the Zionist program. He responded indignantly: "I don't care about it. Of course, I mean, I care about the flaws, I'm the prime minister. I have to improve things, I have to amend things. But when I celebrate the 60th anniversary of the state of Israel, what I have in mind are the enormous achievements." He went on to discuss the largely successful absorption of 1 million Russian immigrants. "Of course there are flaws," he said. "Who cares?"

With Uri Grossman in mind, I asked Olmert about a flaw of personal concern to me: Why is Israel less physically safe for Jews than America?

He answered: "I'll tell you something that you have to realize, and this is the most important thing and this is the most significant thing. First of all, no people are safe anywhere, okay? Let me tell you, Jews are not safer in Israel than they are in other parts of the world, but there is only one place that Jews can fight for their lives as Jews, and that is here. They can fight as Americans, they can fight as Australians—but as individuals." He banged on his desk. "Jews were persecuted, Jews were attacked, Jews were suppressed, Jews were killed. But they could never defend themselves as Jews."

So the success of the American Jewish community doesn't lessen the necessity for the state of Israel? "Never, never, no way," he said. "By the way, Jews in Germany—and I don't draw any comparison at all—Jews in other parts of the world were very successful all their lives, and that didn't provide them with safety."

The prime minister of Israel should be able to muster an argument for the necessity of his country without forecasting a Holocaust in America. His was a careless and cynical statement, one that supports the notion that he is not Israel's deepest thinker. And yet his record presents an obvious contradiction. On one crucial issue, Olmert is credited by many of the most doubting Israelis with sincerity and thoughtfulness: his newfound belief that the dream of a Greater Israel—one that incorporates the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights—is dead, replaced with the recognition that the land must be split between a Jewish democratic state and an Arab state. This sort of

transformation is as rare in Israeli politics as it is in American politics. “His willingness to express his new convictions and to speak about them explicitly is both bold and calculated,” one of his foremost critics, the *Ha’aretz* political columnist Ari Shavit, told me.

Olmert is not the only one to undergo this transformation; an entire generation of Likud politicians, protected by the shade cast by the great fighter and Likud apostate Ariel Sharon, has embraced the argument that the occupation threatens Israel’s Jewish future.

I asked Olmert whether there was a moral dimension to his desire to exit the West Bank, and I made reference to a song of his childhood, written by Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of Revisionist Zionism. The revisionists are the ideological ancestors of the Likud Party. The song refers to the *shtay gadot*, or two banks, of the Jordan River: “The Jordan has two banks, and both are ours.”

“I would have loved to have *shtay gadot!*” Olmert said. It was not, as I first thought, an unconsidered outburst. He won’t call the dream of both banks immoral or destructively utopian, because it is a dream that many Israelis believe is just. “If there had been a 10 percent or 15 percent minority which is not Jewish there, then it would have been legitimate. But you don’t come to a majority and say to them, ‘Listen, we deprive you of your right to self-determination and at the same time we won’t provide you with the natural right of equality and equal votes.’”

“At the end of the day, it was about demography,” he said. “We couldn’t do it.”

The new leftists—or new realists—find justification for their position in the earliest history of Zionism. “Go back to the Basle program of 1897, the first Zionist Congress,” Israel’s ambassador in Washington, Sallai Meridor, told me. Meridor and his brother Dan, who was a minister in the government of Menachem Begin, abandoned their belief in untrammelled settlement several years ago. “Herzl asks Nordau”—Max Nordau, the essayist and critic who served as his deputy—“to come up with one sentence of what Zionism is to achieve. He wrote that Zionism is meant to create for the Jewish people a homeland in the land of Israel, assured by international legitimacy. One sentence, the whole story. It’s about Jewish people, about defining the community of Jews as a nation, one in the family of nations. Second, it’s not a state for all citizens, but for the Jewish people. Third, it’s in the land of Israel, but not necessarily *all* the land of Israel. And it has to be secured by international legitimacy.”

Israel's flagging international legitimacy is one of Olmert's preoccupations. In an interview with *Ha'aretz* in November, he said, "If the day comes when the two-state solution collapses and we face a South African-style struggle for equal voting rights [among Palestinians of the occupied territories], then, as soon as that happens, the state of Israel is finished." He went on to say, "The Jewish organizations, which were our power base in America, will be the first to come out against us, because they will say they cannot support a state that does not support democracy and equal voting rights for all its residents."

As a young Knesset member of the Likud Party, Olmert was not nearly so concerned about Israel's international reputation. He voted against the ratification of the Camp David Accords with Egypt, which had been negotiated by the leader of his party, Menachem Begin. Today, he says Begin was right. "He was smarter than I was." If he were alive today, Olmert said, Begin would support an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. "Menachem Begin understood by 1977 that we couldn't incorporate Judea and Samaria [the biblical names for the West Bank] into the state of Israel. We can't do it, and therefore he did not do it."

What Olmert failed to mention was that Begin himself accelerated the process of settling Israelis in the West Bank, and was in particular a zealous supporter of Gush Emunim (the Bloc of the Faithful), the near-messianic group that seeded the West Bank with Jewish settlements. Today, the settlers are a small but influential political constituency (there are 200,000 settlers in the West Bank—a majority of whom moved there for economic, rather than ideological, reasons—and another 200,000 in the eastern suburbs of Jerusalem), and they have deployed an effective argument against expulsion: Ariel Sharon's forced removal of 8,000 settlers from the Gaza Strip three years ago, undertaken unilaterally, resulted not in peace but in a barrage of rocket attacks by Hamas on southern Israel, followed by a continuing Israeli military response.

"I'm not saying 'I told you so,' but I told you so," the settler leader Pinchas Wallerstein said not long ago when I saw him at Migron, a settlement outpost near Ramallah. Migron is "illegal," built without the approval of the government, but even the illegal outposts—there are more than 100—are in no danger of imminent evacuation. Olmert removed one, called Amona, in February 2006; more than 200 people, including two Knesset members, were hurt in the riot that accompanied the demolition, and Olmert appears wary of a repeat performance.

Like Begin, Olmert once was a friend of the settlers. I asked him why the country only recently awoke to the threat the settlements pose. He bristled. "First of all, this is something that must be understood with humility and compassion," he said. "In 1948, we achieved independence with a divided Jerusalem, with the parts of Jerusalem that were the essential ingredients of the collective Jewish memory and something that we yearned for, for thousands of years, not in our hands. In 1967 came the fulfillment, finally, of all

the dreams of thousands of years by reaching the territories which are more intimately linked to Jewish history than anything else, particularly Jerusalem. So how can you wonder why we didn't have the emotional power to restrain ourselves from wanting to realize the fulfillment of our dreams? It took us time to grasp the full complexity of the situation. But how can you wonder, at the beginning, why we had this enthusiasm?"

I noted that by late 1967, David Ben-Gurion, then an old man in retirement on his desert kibbutz, was arguing that Israel should find a way out of the occupied territories as soon as possible. Did Ben-Gurion lack Zionist fervor?

Olmert litigated the question instead of answering it: "He certainly didn't say 'Get rid of Jerusalem.'"

What led to Olmert's conversion regarding the settlements was not only the realization—one that came to him over the course of three decades or so—that the permanent occupation of the West Bank and Gaza might undermine Israel's security, but also a recognition that the Palestinians themselves had changed.

"Listen, let's face it, I don't know what my position would have been had a change not taken place on the other side as well. What the Palestinians say—not all of them, of course—some of the declared, elected leadership of the Palestinian people say, 'I want to live in peace with Israel and I recognize Israel's right to exist.' They didn't say it 40 years ago, they didn't say it 30 years ago, 25 years ago."

The Palestinians, however, are fighting a civil war. Gaza is under the control of Hamas, which is the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. The West Bank is under the control of the Palestinian Authority, headed by the Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas, who, over the past several months, has been negotiating a framework agreement for peace with Israel. All sides recognize that the Palestinian Authority would find it difficult to implement an agreement, but Olmert's goal is to negotiate the parameters of a final settlement as a way, if nothing else, to strengthen the hands of Palestinian moderates against Hamas.

The latest iteration of the never-ending Middle East peace process, launched in Annapolis late last year by President Bush, is in many ways a farce. Olmert's ruling coalition is unstable, and he is deeply unpopular. Bush shows no sustained interest in understanding the dispute. Condoleezza Rice is ignored across the Middle East. And Abbas's authority doesn't radiate far beyond Ramallah, the de facto Palestinian capital. The tragedy of this farce is that this could be the last time a two-state solution is seen as a viable option. It is a cliché for Middle East leaders to warn that time is running out, but today it

seems that the possibility of a two-state solution is swiftly fading. Palestinian rejectionists and unbending Jewish settlement leaders are in harmony on this point. "It does not matter what the Jews do. We will not let them have peace," Ibrahim Mudeiris, the imam of the Ijlin Mosque in Gaza, told me not long ago. We spoke after Friday prayers. The street outside the mosque was crowded with angry young men who had been excited by Mudeiris's sermon, in which he identified Jews as "the sons of apes and pigs."

"They can be nice to us or they can kill us, it doesn't matter," he said. "If we have a cease-fire with the Jews, it is only so that we can prepare ourselves for the final battle."

For Palestinian radicals, the closing of the settlements would be a terrible blow. The smartest Palestinian strategists understand this. "The longer they stay out there, the more Israel will appear to the world to be essentially an apartheid state," the former Palestinian Authority negotiator Michael Tarazi told me a few years ago. "The settlements mean that the egg is hopelessly scrambled. Basically, it is already one state."

The hard-core settlers are as intransigent, and as patient, as their Palestinian counterparts. The mayor of Ariel, one of the West Bank's largest Jewish towns, told me that time is on the side of the settlers. Ariel, which has a population of roughly 20,000, is southwest of Nablus, the largest Arab city in the West Bank. "We have to hold on for a few more years, at most," Ron Nachman, the mayor, said. "Then the world will realize that the solution lies with Jordan." Nachman, along with many other West Bank settler leaders, believes that the Palestinians of the West Bank should be made Jordanian citizens. The Palestinians don't generally seek this. Nor do the Jordanians. But Nachman said that once the world realizes that Israel's presence in the West Bank is eternal, it will come to view the "Jordanian option" as a plausible solution. "Trust me, no one is throwing us out of Ariel," he said.

For many of the settlers, and certainly for their spiritual leaders, the state of Israel's democracy is of minimal concern. A couple of years ago, I visited the Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva in Jerusalem, which has graduated many of the settlement movement's leaders, to speak to its rabbis about the balance between democracy and Judaism.

In early March, the yeshiva was attacked by a Palestinian gunman who killed eight students, mainly teenagers, in a library. When I had visited Mercaz HaRav, Rabbi David Samson, a teacher at the yeshiva and one of the leading proponents of its philosophy, had foretold the attack: "We are of course a target of terror. The enemies of the Jewish people know the importance of this yeshiva. We send forth the pioneers to build the state." In the course of a lengthy discussion, Samson explained the yeshiva's position on democracy. "Democracy is not a value for us. Justice is a value, and fairness, but not democracy. In the Book of Exodus, it says that the Jews shall be a kingdom of

priests and a holy nation. It does not talk about democracy.” The Arabs who live in biblical Israel, he said, can either choose “to get along with us, to live peacefully, or to leave.” He said the Arabs would have the status of “protected foreigners” in Israel; they would have local autonomy, but have no say in the governance of Israel.

What if the world rejects this? “The world has always rejected the Jews. But God always provides.” God will punish the Jews, he said, if they divide the Holy Land. “A Palestinian state would be an abomination.”

A Palestinian state, of course, might not come to pass. Ziad Abu Zayyad, a former minister in the Palestinian Authority government, is a veteran peace negotiator and one of the few Palestinian leaders who still view a two-state solution as conceivable. “There are only two or three years left,” he said. “If this doesn’t work, then everyone will be arguing for a one-state solution.”

The one-state solution—the dissolution of Israel and the merging of the Jewish and Arab populations—is neither practicable nor, from the Israeli perspective, desirable. (In the 1940s, many Jewish thinkers endorsed the idea of binationalism, but the idea was rejected by the Arabs.) In any case, the dismantling of Israel as a Jewish state would, of course, demand the agreement of Israel’s Jews, who, for manifold reasons, would not want to live in a state dominated by Arabs. “I’ll make a prediction that Israel will not commit suicide,” Yehezkel Dror, the head of the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute and a political scientist at Hebrew University, told me.

David Grossman, like most of Israel’s leftists, sees binationalism as simultaneously utopian and dismissive of Jewish feelings. “You know, binationalism doesn’t work in so many places in the world,” he said. “You see it in Belgium now. And they expect, with this really hateful combination of Jews and Arabs, that it will succeed here? It’s so wrong. Part of the cure for the historical distortions of both peoples is that they need a place of their own with defined borders. We have to heal separately. I’m a little suspicious of these people who would experiment on us with binationalism.”

Reality, he said, has made a Jewish state necessary. “Since the world has failed to defend Jewish existence, there is a need for a place for the Jews to implement their culture and their values and their language and their history, a place in which to recover.”

But what if Israel’s neighbors never give its Jews a chance to recover from history?

Since the collapse of the Oslo peace process, eight years ago, many of Grossman's allies on the left have abandoned the idea that Arabs will reconcile themselves to a Jewish state in their midst. Benny Morris, a historian who has done much work to uncover evidence of Jewish sin, as well as Arab sin, in the birth of Israel, recently wrote: "The situation [Jewish] Israelis live in, and even more so, most likely face, is antediluvian, revolutionary and possibly apocalyptic." When I spoke to Morris in Jerusalem, he described Israel as an "amazing success story" and, in virtually the same sentence, called it "the most dangerous place in the world for Jews as Jews, as a collective of 5 million people who are in danger of extinction in the short term from an Iranian nuclear bomb and in the long term by being overwhelmed by Arabs."

Grossman, despite his existential fears, has not given up on the idea of compromise. In *The Yellow Wind*, he tells of the time he found himself trapped at Bethlehem University, as a Palestinian demonstration raged around him.

I write the following in my green notebook: Now, the truth. Are you afraid? Yes. And if something happens to you here, if they hurt you, do you think it will cause you to revise your opinions? To begin to surrender to hate? And if they were to hurt your child?

I set down the answer for the record and as personal testimony, and it is all written there, in the green notebook.

His private answer is now public; since Uri's death, he has not cast aside his opposition to occupation and settlement, or his belief in reconciliation.

But this does not necessarily suggest that he would make a sophisticated negotiator, or a sound strategist. Grossman believes that Israel must negotiate with Hamas, an organization that pays obeisance to Iran, that bases its charter in part on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and that has shown itself to be more interested in destroying Israel than in building a state of its own.

Of course, any such talks would necessarily grant legitimacy to Hamas and undermine the more moderate Palestinian leadership in the West Bank who remain Israel's best, and perhaps only, hope for a more tranquil future.

The West Bank leadership cannot be buttressed merely with rhetoric, or with ineffectual negotiations meant to erect only the scaffolding of an agreement. The Camp David negotiations in 2000 collapsed mainly because the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat, was unable to strike a final deal with Israel. But during the seven years of the Oslo peace process, which was meant to negotiate a Palestinian state into existence, the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank nearly doubled. It is difficult to blame Palestinians for their cynicism about Israeli intentions regarding the West Bank. Only by closing outposts and dismantling settlements can Israeli leaders help the Palestinian moderates, and themselves. When I asked Olmert why he argues for an Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian

territory but allows the expansion of existing settlements and the continued existence of illegal outposts, he barked, "I dismantled Amona!" Amona is the outpost that came down in February 2006. "That was the most traumatic event, even more than the disengagement from Gaza. It was very violent."

Not one outpost has been dismantled since Amona was closed, and none seems slated for impending disappearance. This is the core of Grossman's criticism of Olmert. The prime minister, in his view, is a skilled rhetorician but a political coward, one who speaks the language of reconciliation but whose actions in Lebanon, and in Gaza, suggest something else.

There is a split on the left; some of Grossman's allies believe that he is, in fact, too hard on the prime minister. "Olmert is paralyzed because the people are paralyzed," A. B. Yehoshua said. "The whole country is paralyzed."

And tired. Benny Morris noted recently that, just as the West is tired of the hundred-year war in the Middle East, so too are Israelis. Morris's analysis contained an echo of a statement made by Olmert three years ago, when he was still vice premier under Sharon. "We are tired of fighting," he told the Israel Policy Forum, a liberal pro-Israel group, in New York. "We are tired of being courageous, we are tired of winning, we are tired of defeating our enemies. We want that we will be able to live in an entirely different environment of relations with our enemies."

Olmert's shift to the left did not occur in a vacuum. His wife, Aliza, has been a sympathizer of Peace Now, and his children have been left-wing activists. One daughter, Dana, is a prominent gay-rights advocate in Tel Aviv, and has associated herself with groups opposed to her father's policies. During the 2006 Israeli incursions into Gaza, she took part in a demonstration that denounced the army chief of staff as a "child-killer." One of Olmert's sons has refused to serve his army-reserve duty in the occupied territories, and another son managed to avoid the draft altogether. Olmert's family is not entirely unusual; the secular left, which once provided a disproportionate number of officers and commandos to the army, no longer does so; sons of the settlements now account for more than 25 percent of the Israeli officer corps. Which makes the left-wing Grossman family's contribution to the national defense more striking.

I asked Olmert whether he would still like to reconcile with Grossman. "Look, I have responsibilities to attend to," he said. "I met with every one of the bereaved families who was ready to meet with me. He was demonstrating against me rather than sitting with me. Which is perfectly legitimate, but I sit with many of the families. I think most of them came here and sat with me, something you don't find in any other country in the world. If you would know how many hours I spent with the families of the fallen soldiers!"

Olmert blustered on for a while, comparing himself to Rudy Giuliani, stressing his commitment to peace and security, mocking his former Likud colleagues, and praising himself for the care he provides the families of the dead. He neglected to mention something I learned only later. For almost two years, he has repeatedly sent emissaries to Grossman, hoping for a reconciliation. These emissaries included his daughter Dana and a former speaker of the Knesset, Avraham Burg, both sent to persuade Grossman to see him. Dana Olmert's visit backfired; Grossman asked her to place herself in his shoes: Would she reconcile with her father, if she were Grossman? No, she said, according to people familiar with the conversation.

Burg's message was unequivocal. Olmert is trying to save Israel by compromising with the Palestinians, and he is in dire need of help. The prime minister has permanently alienated the country's right wing. The Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva announced shortly after the fatal attack that Olmert would not be welcome to pay a condolence call. "We cannot receive a prime minister who advocates against the spirit of the Torah and accept that Israel withdraws from a part of the Land of Israel," a yeshiva official, Rabbi Haim Steiner, said.

Burg told me: "I believe that any person who wants to influence society cannot allow himself to be in a situation where you won't talk to the prime minister." But Grossman has so far rejected Burg's pleas.

Burg's visit was motivated not only by politics, he said. He is concerned about Olmert's emotional well-being.

"The prime minister suffers the casualties of war," Burg said. "He doesn't sleep at night. He knows what Uri Grossman represents."