

War on Gaza Crystalizes Israel's Image. Prof. Yakov Rabkin

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*Modern Israel attracts much attention from analysts and the public but our ability to understand it is hindered by ideology, prejudice, and myth. Many tread carefully when discussing Israel lest they be accused of antisemitism. In an [earlier article](#), I explained what distinguishes **anti-Zionism from antisemitism**. However, the fundamental difficulty lies in the habitual association of the state in Western Asia with the Jews. Should we view those who inhabit and govern Israel as Jews or have they become something else — namely, Israelis?*

The “nature versus nurture” debate over the relative influence of inherited traits versus environmental conditions on humans is older than many realize. It can be traced through different stages of the biblical narrative. Angry at the Israelites’ worship of the golden calf, God was ready [to destroy them all](#) and start anew with Moses. Nature was to blame, as God despaired that these “stiff-necked people” could be re-educated.

In another biblical story, however, the Israelites were sent to wander in the wilderness for forty years to be reformatted before being allowed to enter the Land of Canaan. In this case, the emphasis was on nurture over nature, with the hope that the experience of benefiting from boundless generosity—such as the [manna](#) and the [protective clouds of glory](#)—would change them. This may have been the first known attempt at social engineering, even though the success was only variable.

The contemporary history of the Jews presents a more daring case of such re-education. For centuries, Jewish ideals have stressed mercy, modesty, and beneficence. The abhorrence of violence is so ingrained that in many Jewish communities, knives, which could be tools of murder, must be removed from the table before reciting the grace after a meal. Blessing and violence are deemed incompatible.

After centuries of being educated to strive for moral perfection, some Jews — initially a tiny minority — adopted a unusual role as colonial settlers—a role historically associated with European Christian civilization.

“Mostly atheists and agnostics, Zionist pioneers in Palestine concluded that “God does not exist, but He promised us this land.”

They conveniently instrumentalized biblical commandments, [such as](#) “You shall clear out the Land and settle in it, for I have given you the Land to occupy it.”

The settlers embraced a literal and materialistic reading of the Bible abandoning the

interpretative tradition developed in rabbinic Judaism. Jewish tradition reads the biblical verses that mention violence allegorically: the [sword and the bow](#) used by Jacob the Patriarch against his enemies become symbols of [obedience to divine commandments and good deeds](#). Tradition locates Jewish heroism in the house of study, not on the battlefield. But Zionists rejected this tradition as that of “exilic weaklings.”

Naturally, like in other locations such as India, America, or Algeria, most inhabitants of Palestine—Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike—resented the Zionists who began colonizing Palestine in the late 19th century.

Resistance emerged, and generations of Israelis grew up fighting against it. Palestinians came to be perceived as a constant source of danger. Educated in the spirit of military courage, moral superiority, and self-righteousness, the Israeli came to disdain and replace the Jew. The murder of Jacob De Haan, a Jewish anti-Zionist lawyer, by members of a Zionist militia in 1924 marked not only the [onset of organized political terrorism](#) in Palestine but also the affirmation of a new national identity.

Ideals of martial valour were not only inculcated through the educational system but, more powerfully, were induced by the predicament of all colonial settlements: suppressing resistance from the colonized. Generation after generation of Israelis have participated in the violent “pacification of the natives,” forcing them to submit to discrimination, dispossession, and ethnic cleansing.

The daily news of brutalities perpetrated by the Israeli military in Gaza underscores the success of the Zionist transformation of the Jew. The [massive support](#) that these acts receive from Israeli society at large strongly confirms this. The recent debate in the Israeli parliament when some Knesset members asserted the legitimacy of gang raping Palestinian detainees by Israeli soldiers reveals profound dehumanization—that is, the denial of full humanity in others, along with the cruelty and suffering that accompany it. But this also threatens the humanity of the soldier.

To mitigate this, the soldier must keep a distance from his victim. This is achieved through the industrialization of murder, which began with gas chambers and carpet bombing and continued with targeted assassinations by missiles and kamikaze drones. World-renowned Israeli scientists and engineers, assisted by major American corporations, have made a qualitative advance in streamlining remote violence. In Gaza, artificial intelligence (AI) now [determines targets and destroys them](#). This points to an abdication not only of their ancestors’ moral values but of humanity altogether.

The Israelis’ war on Gaza confirms a triumph of nurture over nature, all the while demonstrating that technological progress does not equate to progress in humanity. In fact, it normalizes amorality, which most Western governments accept because, in their view, it is Jews who commit these atrocities, whether qualified as mass murder, ethnic cleansing, or genocide. Few realize that a century of living by the sword has transformed the Jew into a ruthless Israeli. Thus, one can better understand Israel as a state and a society when it is no longer regarded as “the Jewish state”, a nebulous concept that only blurs our vision and obscures reality. Only then can the world judge Israel on merit like any other state.

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