Introduction

We appeal in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

Israel's Declaration of Independence proclaimed that it would be a democratic country with equal rights for all its citizens. It is remarkable that while combating the attempts to abort the nascent state, the founders of Israel remained insistent that it would maintain its open, democratic nature.

Religious Zionists take pride in our Jewish national homeland and its achievements. The extraordinary ingathering of Jews from every corner of the globe after 2,000 years of exile, the restoration of a state and the revival of the Hebrew language is extraordinary. Beyond the creation and survival of the State, we look at the astonishing accomplishments of the young state and feel enormous satisfaction at the successes in science, the arts and most of all in Torah study which is now taking place at levels which are unprecedented in Jewish history.

But religious Zionism dare not be complacent. As the future of the State becomes more stable, the nature of its culture and value system becomes even more critical. Rav Soloveitchik, the esteemed leader of Twentieth Century American Orthodoxy argued that if the State of Israel was merely a nation like all others acting as a refuge for Jews bound together by the shared fate of seeking shelter from persecution, it would not be fulfilling its potential. The mission of the State of Israel must be to live out the destiny of the Jewish people by creating a country based on the highest values of Jewish tradition and the Torah.

The mission of the State of Israel is neither the termination of the unique isolation of the Jewish people nor the abrogation of its unique fate - in this it will not succeed, but the elevation of a camp-people to the rank of a holy congregation-nation and the transformation of shared fate to shared destiny.¹

For Rav Kook, the formation of a State with the infrastructure of a government and a whole cultural life of its own offered the perfect tool for the Jewish people to exhibit its highest possible values. Describing the Jewish people's national mission to deliver humanity from spiritual and material suffering he wrote;
For the fulfillment of this longing, it is really necessary that this society should possess a political and social state with a seat of national government, at the peak of human culture, 'a wise and understanding people and a great nation': and the absolute Godly Idea should reign there, reviving the people and the land with its life.  

But Rav Kook was also well aware of the dangers that nationalism could bring:

Nationalist feeling is a sentiment exalted in its honest naturalness, but when it is not properly directed and does not turn to the higher goal of the absolute happiness of general perfection, it will eventually burst the bounds of morality when it oversteps its boundaries by raising a hand to capture castles that do not belong to it, without righteous judgment and with no holy goal or purpose.

The difficulties of creating shared citizenship

Whilst religious Zionism has a wonderful, idealistic message, ongoing challenges to the legitimacy of the State, attacks on its borders and terrorist attacks within its cities have hardened the attitudes of some Jewish-Israeli citizens. They argue that the struggle against terrorism must take precedence over all other issues and with security uppermost in their minds, issues of equality and partnerships with minorities to develop the country are a low priority.

Suni Muslim Arabs and Druze make up 20% of Israel's population. Members of these minority communities are deeply proud of their long history in the land. They do not feel indebted to the Jewish State for allowing them to remain in their ancestral homes - instead they are aggrieved by the prejudice suffered by their families. They do not see Israeli culture as glue that binds the country together, rather they see it as a way of life which has been foisted upon them, usurping their lifestyle and weakening their communities. Viewing the growth of the country, they do not celebrate the relative improvements which Israeli sovereignty has brought to their environment; rather they resent the relatively superior living conditions of their Jewish neighbors.

Shared Citizenship - a Jewish Imperative

For religious Zionists who care passionately about their people and their right to dwell securely in their national homeland, the regional conflict seems so enormous and so intractable that it is tempting to give up on any possibility of shaping a better shared future for all Israeli citizens. Our Rabbis recognized that those who grieve personal and communal losses face a daunting task in coming to terms with their grief and suffering. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, one of America's greatest scholars, Rabbi Soloveitchik addressed the theological questions of how we should approach evil and suffering. He
concluded that understanding was impossible, but there were things we should do;

The fundamental question is: What obligation does suffering impose upon man? This question is greatly beloved by Judaism, and she has placed it at the very center of her world of thought. The halakhah is concerned with this problem as it is concerned with other problems of permitted and forbidden, liability and exemption. We so not inquire about the hidden ways of the Almighty, but rather, about a path wherein man shall walk when suffering strikes. We ask neither about the cause of evil nor about its purpose but rather about how it might be mended and elevated. How shall a person act in time of trouble? What ought a man to do so that she not perish his afflictions.  

Amidst Israel's difficulties, the Torah does not allow us to be completely complacent about the fabric of our society. It commands us to examine what we can do to ameliorate the situation for everyone's benefit. Our first priority is self-protection; Judaism demands that we do everything reasonable to protect our own lives, so the State of Israel must take whatever security measures are necessary to defend the lives of all its citizens. But whilst the duties of the army are clear, our responsibilities beyond that are more complex.

Our responsibility to the stranger

Jews have a Biblical obligation to care for the lives of the minorities who live amongst us and who are dependent upon us for their rights and freedoms:

You shall not wrong the stranger who has come to you, do not oppress him, for you too were strangers in the Land of Egypt.  

The danger that we might become arrogant and mistreat others concerned the Ramban. He warned that just as God saved us from the oppression of the Egyptians, so he will rise to the defense of all vulnerable groups even if they are persecuted by Jews. The Ramban offers no comfort for those who claim that our status as "The Chosen People" will render us immune from punishment, for our deliverance from Egypt was a response to our affliction, not to any special quality that we had. Commenting on the verse;

The children of Israel sighed because of their bondage and their cry ascended to God from their bondage;

he says:

This means that He did not have mercy on them because of their merits, but only because of their slavery.

Our inability to claim immunity because of our special status is also discussed by the prophet Amos. He warned that on the contrary, our
closeness to God made us liable to even greater punishment for our misconduct.

You alone have I known from all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for your sins.  

So we have to be very careful about every aspect of how we treat others. The Torah opens by describing how humanity was created in God's image. This is the source of our responsibility to every human being. Each person is of divine origin and of infinite value. Each person is unique, teaching us that we should celebrate the differences between us and see within them a glimpse of God's greatness. Each person is a direct descendent of Adam and Eve, so no one can claim that they come from superior lineage to anyone else.

The Mishna teaches that everyone is blessed by being created in the Divine Image and Jews are particularly blessed for having received the Torah. Rav Hirsch explains that the blessing of having the Torah is a model for all nations to develop their relationship with God and maximize religion and morality in the world. This can only be achieved by treating others with decency and respect setting an example of the most upright behaviour. That responsibility applies most of all to strangers and minority groups.

For the Rashbam, our duties to the stranger are not just about avoiding the pitfalls of racism and recognizing the humanity in others, but developing our own generous approach. He points to another verse which states:

You know the spirit of the stranger, for you were strangers.

Our experience of suffering, give us deep insight into the pain suffered by others. Every day, Jews are commanded to recall our experience of slavery and once a year at the Pesach seder, every Jew is obligated to relive the experience of escaping from slavery to freedom. Precisely because we know what it is like to suffer, we are expected to be fair to others.

Isaiah defined the role of the chosen people as building a just society. In magnificent poetry, he spelt out our responsibilities to the vulnerable members of our society:

I the Lord have called you in righteousness and will hold your hand and keep you and give you a covenant of the people for a light of the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison and them that sit in the darkness of the prison house. I am the Lord that is my name . . .

Sometimes, the strangers for whom we must care are not entirely attractive personalities, nor do they fit in perfectly with the way that our society. The Talmud teaches that the reason why Mitzvah of caring for the convert is repeated so many times in the Torah is because even the sincerest convert is tempted to return to their former ways. We must be generous to them to make them feel at home in the community.
At the very outset of the Jewish people, God sent Abraham from his parents’ home on a journey to found the new nation, Abraham was anxious to find a suitable location to launch his project. At his first stop, he saw the people eating, drinking and reveling, he felt uncomfortable with their hedonistic lifestyle, so he begged God not to establish his home there. He continued his journey to Tyre where he saw people weeding their fields, hoeing and planting their crops. Seeing a well functioning, productive, agricultural society, he identified this as the place where he could succeed. He turned to God and said, "Let my portion be in this land". 17

Abraham, himself, arrived as a stranger in the land understood that his new neighbours did not share his theological and religious beliefs; but he recognized a common desire to build a healthy, civil society, which he felt signified that they could live together. Once he settled in the land, he opened his tent and through warm hospitality, he won many of them over to his vision.

Thousands of years later, when the Jewish people were exiled from that land to Babylon, the prophet Jeremiah commanded them to build homes, plant gardens and pray for the welfare of the government. 18 He reasoned that although they had lost their independence and were governed by a hostile despot in a foreign land, their safety and security depended on adapting to their situation and promoting the stability of the ruling power. This idea was adopted by Rabbi Chananiah shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple. He saw the chaos that resulted from disunity and he recognized the value of stable government so he warned:

Pray for the welfare of the government for without it people would eat each other alive". 19

The rabbis recognized that even if a government does not meet all our aspirations, our security and our happiness are still dependent on its stability. In our times, the most stable societies are democracies where people accept the rule of law because they feel that they have the ability to choose leaders who will govern fairly, provide access to healthcare and education and redress for their grievances.

Nature produces inequalities, but our rabbis saw it as our sacred duty to practice “Tzeddakah - justice" and to mitigate the effects of poverty by doing everything possible to enable Jews and Gentiles in our community to live their lives independently and with dignity. 20

Once again, we now have our own stare, we take great pride in having the State of Israel, but it comes with great responsibilities. The potential dangers for a future Jewish state were highlighted by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in nineteenth-century Frankfurt. He warned that in Biblical times, we were vulnerable to persecution by the Egyptians because we were landless foreigners; but given the power, we could just as easily slip into the role of the persecutor:
Therefore, we are warned to see to it that when we have a state of our own, we do not make the rights of any foreigner in our midst dependent upon anything other than the pure human quality inherent in every person. As soon as you abridge this basic human right, you open the door to all the abominations of tyranny and abuse that were practiced in the Land of Egypt.

**Merchavim’s Vision**

The Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth Sir Jonathan Sacks distinguishes between two models of coexistence prescribed by the Torah. One is the ideal of the prophets – it’s a wonderful, utopian vision which unites mortal enemies in blissful harmony:

*The wolf will dwell with the lamb*
*And the leopard shall lie down with the kid*
*The calf, the beast of prey and the fatling together*
*With a little boy to herd them...*
*For the earth shall be full with devotion to the Lord*
*As the waters cover the sea.*

Whilst it is stunningly beautiful, it is also far removed from our current reality of a world with so many unresolved conflicts, so the rabbis developed a second approach characterized by the expression “*Mipnei Darchei Shalom – for the sake of the ways of peace*”. It’s a recipe for different groups of people to get along together, living side by side even when they do not share the same beliefs or lifestyles. In this vein, the rabbis made many decrees demanding that we treat others with respect and compassion even when we wholeheartedly disagree with their lifestyles. It’s a statement about developing citizens who can share the world even when they do not share each others beliefs.
Final thoughts

Israel is a country that has faced existential threats since its foundation and has been in a permanent state of war ever since, so it is not surprising that there are profound tensions between different elements of its society. But as a Jewish country which is committed to democracy, it cannot afford to abandon its core values as an ethical Jewish national homeland – fair to all its citizens.

Although the situation in the Middle East is tense and many Israeli citizens – Jewish and Arab alike - have been devastated by the horrors of war and terrorism, it is possible to restore normality. In his book, The Seventh Million, Tom Segev describes the backgrounds of a group of children who survived the Holocaust:

*Nine out of ten had seen their parents, brothers and sisters beaten or tortured. About half knew that one or both parents were dead. Many had seen their parents or siblings die, from sickness or starvation or cold. They had seen their families beaten to death or shot or burned or drowned in rivers. A quarter of Aliyat Hanoar children had been in concentration camps. Many had been taken in by strangers, some had been mistreated. A large number were alone in the world.*

Yet despite everything, most of them managed to rebuild their lives with successful relationships and careers.

*Their histories reveal a great human drama. The boy thrown into the Danube with his father who drowned became a production engineer at a factory in the Galilee. The boy who was described as an asocial type who should be expelled from the program reached the rank of lieutenant colonel in the army. The boy whose file contains the remark that "he gives the impression of being retarded" became a school principal. This was the Israeli dream.*

Settling the regional conflict is beyond Merchavim's remit. However the nurturing of a fairer society in which our diverse citizens – of all backgrounds – live together more harmoniously and decently is our mission and our duty. Informed by Jewish tradition, the teaching of our rabbis and lessons of our history, we can manage our conflicts and shape a better shared future by developing and realizing models of shared citizenship in which all Israeli citizens feel that they have a dignified space and fair stake in society. Merchavim seeks to achieve this by educating the next generation of Israelis – of all backgrounds - about the power and value of shared citizenship, equal access and fairness in the national homeland of the Jewish people.

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2 Orot Lemahalach Hayediot be Yisrael Chapter 2
3 Rav Kook - Olot Hareiyah p. 234

5 Exodus 22: 20
6 Exodus 2: 23
7 See also Rashi on Vayikra 19: 33 Where he states that God is their God just as he is ours. God is our God, but he is also theirs.
8 Amos 2:2
9 Bereishit 1: 27
10 Mishna Sanhedrin 4: 5
11 Mishna Avot 3: 18
13 Exodus 23: 9
14 Mishna Pesachim 9: 5
15 Isaiah 42: 5-7
16 Bava Metzia 59b – The Gemara suggests that the mitzvah of caring for the convert is repeated 36 or 46 times in the Torah.
17 Bereishit Rabbah 39: 8
18 Jeremiah 29: 5
19 Mishna Avot 3: 2
20 For Jewish responsibilities to non-Jews see Gittin 61a
21 Isaiah 11: 6-9
24 Ibid p. 171