

## Young Zionist

### **Safeguarding the Zionist vision: A State and a Land**

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My vision of Israel in fifty years time is of a satellite image of uniform green and grey. This vision, seemingly epitomising the glories of development and progress, of blooming deserts and flourishing urban centres, conceals a subaltern dystopia. At the heart of this dystopia is the fundamental tenet of the Zionist vision- a State of Israel in the land of Israel. My vision is of the coexistence of a successful State of Israel and a highly valued land of Israel. My usage of the phrase 'land of Israel' is not imbued with its current politicisation; rather, I use the phrase in the sense of the physical landscape. Encoded within this physical landscape are centuries of history, of constantly changing power relationships within the land of Israel. Millennia of invasions, changes in regional authority and cultural influence have all left their mark on this landscape. Since the arrival of the Israelites in the land of Israel, every regime has, in its own unique way, constructed a cultural hybrid inclusive of the Jewish nation. The land of Israel presents a high resolution, dynamic, embedded story of the Jewish nation since the departure from Egypt. The land of Israel is therefore of central importance to Zionist vision. It is ironic and tragic that the State of Israel may present a grave threat to the survival of the land of Israel.

The challenge for Israel over the next fifty years is to avoid becoming a satellite image of uniform green and uniform grey. The vision of David Ben Gurion to make the desert bloom is, with qualification, an admirable goal for the State of Israel to aspire to. A homogenous landscape of commercial agriculture from horizon to horizon is seen within a Ben Gurion-inspired vision as a positive development to be unconditionally celebrated.

However, as I will explain, such a homogenous reality would have a negative impact for Israel. What is missing from much of the visionary discourse is an understanding of the importance of the land of Israel. In the name of economic expansion, we are asked to celebrate the building of new roads, large-scale commercial agriculture, the integration of more towns into the coastal plain megalopolis, and the creeping lateral growth of towns and villages until only roads divide neighbouring urban centres. I believe that irreversible 'progress' of this nature will ultimately undermine the Zionist dream it believes itself to be part of.

I will first outline what I view as the classic utopian vision of current Zionist discourse. In a post-conflict Israel, we can envision the extraordinary levels of economic growth. The incentives of a highly skilled labour force and advantageous geographic location will encourage unprecedented levels of inward investment. The Negev will become a pre-eminent region of technological advances and scientific achievements. Jerusalem, at the meeting point of civilisations, will be a node of great importance in the global cultural network. All of Israel will enjoy peace and prosperity. This 'utopian' vision of the future must, I contend, be greeted with some concern.

As I have described, the landscape of Israel is dynamic, influenced by the evolution of the society within it. The State of Israel has and will alter the landscape in the same way as any evolving power. The danger for the land is the rate and nature of growth. The rate of growth is not a problem in of itself, and I am in no way advocating an eco-centric deliberate contraction of the economy to 'save' the environment. The threat to the land of Israel comes from the nature of the growth. An emphasis on unregulated, unrestricted growth as an economic panacea may reap short-term gains by reducing production costs. Yet in the long-term, the future of a land of Israel depends on strict external regulations to prevent the situation in the coastal plain from being repeated across the length and breadth of this small land.

The protection of the land of Israel is, I believe, essential to the continuance of the Zionist vision in fifty years time. From a purely economic viewpoint, there will be substantial and ever increasing economic benefits from conserving the biblical landscape for the tourism industry, which in fifty years time will remain a crucial sector in the Israeli economy. However, there are further important reasons to protect the landscape. Citizens of Israel should not live within a enclosed concretised landscape, and for the health of the nation, as much of the natural landscape as possible must be conserved. I would argue that even today the Negev holds a high existence value in the Israeli psyche as a place of escape, stillness, beauty and isolation, even for the many Israelis who do not actually visit the region. It is quite possible today to enter canyons that feel entirely remote from the modern State of Israel, yet utterly connected to the land of Israel. Here was where, at the Wilderness of Zin, the Israelites halted thousands of years ago. The Land of the Negev is the most pure biblical landscape to be found within the State of Israel. But in fifty years the sands and canyons and empty plains may have been subsumed under the enormous burden of progress. The State will see the desert bloom, yet the land beneath will wither and erode under the burden of 'progress'.

The potential degradation of the landscape has important implications on the Zionist dream. To religious Zionists in Israel and the Diaspora, the land of Israel is arguably the justificatory prerequisite to the state of Israel. The Zionist youth movements of the Diaspora value the land of Israel almost as highly as the apparatus of the state. From these two groups come the vast majority of Western Diaspora olim. It is not enough to preserve patches of nature reserve to hold out against an engulfing development imperative. The land of Israel can only retain the mystique essential to the perpetuation of the Zionist narrative through retention of the attributes of the past. The drama and emotion of Masada, the biblical grandeur of the desert, the beauty of the north, the history radiating from the Judean Hills, all this can only be maintained through a protection of the landscape that must be at the centre of every development plan.

Israel has a consistent record of landscape protection, but over the next fifty years, the pressures on this landscape will be unprecedented. This period will shape the future of the land and the state of Israel. Will Israel lose sight of the value of the landscape under the blinding attraction of 'development'? Can the Zionist dream be perpetuated without the romanticism, historical and religious importance of the land? I am not positing a forced choice of either successful economic growth or landscape protection. The two are entirely compatible in the predominantly knowledge-based economy that Israel is likely to become. Fifty years from now, Israel has the potential to be a culturally, socially and economically flourishing state with a strong attraction for the Zionist Diaspora, yet this utopia can only be realised within the framework of prioritisation of the protection of the land of Israel throughout this period of dramatic growth. Unless this can be accomplished, the dystopian vision of a state that had destroyed its

most important asset would ultimately end in the diminishing of Zionist passion, lower quality of life, and moral corruption of a state that destroyed what it had aimed to protect and enhance.

The importance of outlining our fears for the future can be judged by the extent to which we are able to act in the present to prevent the dystopian vision from becoming a reality. Each of us as individuals has a responsibility to ensure that we act in a sustainable manner towards the land of Israel.

At the same time, the issue of land protection must be consistently at the forefront of the political agenda. The influence of external authority is essential to regulate against exploitation and unchecked spatial growth. At a more practical level, the government of Israel needs to consider tightening its planning regulations. Within the coastal plain, I propose a near total ban on green-field site development in order to preserve the little open landscape remaining undeveloped in the region. Regeneration of brown-field sites, regentrification and vertical growth within existing urban boundaries should be promoted as far as possible for new developments within this region. In the north, green-belt legislation must be implemented to prevent unchecked urban expansion, although I believe the landscape does still have some capacity for further lateral growth. In the Negev, I believe it is important to preserve large unbroken expanses of desert for future generations of Israelis. However, there is certainly a huge amount of unutilised 'capacity' for population and economic growth in the Negev, and enhancement of incentives to encourage regulated growth in the Negev would ease pressure on more densely developed areas of the country. These practical suggestions for policy that I have outlined fit within the overall framework for political decisions over the next fifty years of prioritising protection of the landscape wherever possible. Sustainable development will enable Israel in fifty years to remain true to the Zionist dream of a State of Israel within a land of Israel.