

# Knowledge-Nation Israel: A New Unifying Vision

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In 1889, Ahad Ha'am shook the Jewish world with his controversial essay "The Wrong Way." Criticizing mainstream Zionism—a Zionism of land purchase, settlements, and agriculture—as shortsighted and unsustainable, Ahad Ha'am warned against the movement's already waning power over the Jews of his day:

Whereas previously the [Zionist] idea grew ever stronger and stronger and spread more and more widely among all sections of the people, while its sponsors looked to the future with exultation and high hopes, now, after its victory, it has ceased to win new adherents, and even its old adherents seem to lose their energy, and ask for nothing more than the well-being of the few poor colonies already in existence, which are what remains of all their pleasant visions of an earlier day. But even this modest demand remains unfulfilled; the land is full of intrigues and quarrels and pettiness—all for the sake and for the glory of the great idea—which give them no peace and endless worry; and who knows what will be the end of it all?<sup>1</sup>

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Though they may have proven overly pessimistic at the time, these ominous words seem sadly pertinent today, 120 years later. Zionism, at least in its classical sense, has lost much of its force as a unifying vision for Israel.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, the majority of Israelis are still avowed patriots and regard post-Zionism as the gravest of sins. Yet even they would be hard-pressed to explain why the old national ideals are still relevant, or what part they play in the contemporary Israeli reality. At the same time, others are bitterly disillusioned with Zionism and consider it the root of all evil—from the continuing occupation of the territories to the systematic discrimination against Sephardi Jews and Israeli Arabs. The result of this ideological fragmentation is a politics defined by sectarianism, a country without an inclusive ethos, rapidly disintegrating into tribal structures. The frail cord that binds us together, it seems, is wearing fast.

Despite the general outcry against this trend and the numerous attempts to reverse it, classical Zionism, I believe, can no longer serve as a collective credo for the State of Israel.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for its decline are not, as is commonly claimed, ideological bankruptcy and a turn toward radical individualism; rather, they are socioeconomic changes that are sweeping the world over. The first of these is the gradual dispossession of the nation-state by the market-state. The second is the evolution from an agrarian to an industrial to a creative economy, a process that has rendered the romantic ideals of the Jewish national movement somewhat obsolete.<sup>4</sup> The third, more local reason for the dissolution of Zionist ideology is Israel's reality as a multicultural society: Over half of its population is composed of three major subgroups—the Haredim, immigrants from the former USSR, and Arabs—that have never subscribed to Zionism and are not likely to do so in the future.

In analyzing the causes of the eventual demise of the old Zionist worldview this essay also seeks to formulate an alternative. Given Israel's current character as both a market-state and a creative economy, the alternative herein presented—not unlike that of Ahad Ha'am in his day—is that of a “knowledge-nation.” The proposal outlined in what follows, which I have labeled KNI (*Knowledge-Nation Israel*), links the rich

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cultural heritage of the Jewish past with the new socioeconomic reality of the Israeli present. Drawing on the tradition of study that has dominated Jewish history throughout the ages, KNI proposes to turn the pursuit and production of knowledge into the binding ethos of Israeli society. Potentially meaningful for all sectors of Israel's population, and perfectly suited to contemporary socioeconomic developments, KNI may serve as an innovative vision—a new form of Zionism—that will usher the Jewish state into the twenty-first century.

## II

To grasp fully the urgency of adopting the KNI ideal, one must first understand the historical conditions that have necessitated it—most notably, the rise and fall of the “old” Zionist ethos. Classical Zionism was, of course, firmly grounded within the Jewish tradition. It was also, however, a distinctly modern phenomenon, inextricably linked to the dramatic developments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In its attempt to respond to the challenges of its day, Zionism became historically bound by the circumstances of its inception, growing gradually anachronistic as those circumstances altered and times changed.

The dawn of modern nationalism, according to some contemporary theories, must be understood as a direct result of the industrial revolution.<sup>5</sup> In pre-industrial agrarian societies, over 80 percent of the population worked in the agricultural sector, the ruling elite was defined by landownership, and the vast majority of people were illiterate. This situation changed dramatically in the nineteenth century with the emergence of the industrial state. Economic and political power was transferred to a rapidly growing, educated workforce, ranging from the liberal professions through a new managerial class to a burgeoning financial sector.

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The industrial economy's increasing need for a literate class brought the question of language to the forefront. Those whose language was taught in school would fill government and managerial posts as well as control the media (which, in the modern state, played an increasing role). Since most European territories were multiethnic and multilingual, the group that wished to impose its language on society had to secure its legitimacy through a historical narrative that linked the country to a collective past. This narrative served to create a sense of community within the emerging nation-state, allowing large, often heterogeneous groups to coalesce around a common language, ethnicity, and culture.<sup>6</sup>

Herein lies the dialectic of modern nationalism. On the one hand, the modern industrial state undermined traditional values, transformed agrarian society, and weakened the ties between the population and the land. On the other hand, it established its dominion by adopting a nostalgic rhetoric, creating a mythical collective past, and casting its mission in terms of the ethnos-land narrative typical of pre-industrial society.

Such a dialectic was particularly pronounced in the case of modern Jewish nationalism, which strove to promote the biblical ethnos-land narrative in place of the longstanding model of diasporic existence. It was a radical change, an attempt to transform a society that was, to use the terms coined by historian Yuri Slezkine, deeply "Mercurian" into something resembling its European host cultures, which were largely "Apollonian."

This dichotomy requires further elaboration. The agrarian societies of Europe, argues Slezkine, bore an Apollonian structure (Apollo was "the god of both livestock and agriculture... the patron of food production"<sup>7</sup>). Since they lived off the land, they nurtured a strong sense of attachment to "mother earth," were committed to a traditional values system, and prized permanence and stability above all.

Nonetheless, every major agrarian society from Malaysia to China to premodern Europe required a subgroup to provide the services incompatible with the Apollonian ethos, such as trade, banking, and medicine. Slezkine calls these Mercurian occupations (Mercury being "the patron of rule

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breakers, border crossers, and go-betweens; the protector of people who lived by their wit, art, and craft”<sup>8</sup>). The ethnic or religious subgroups that provided Mercurian services often differentiated themselves from their surroundings by marrying only inside the group, adhering to dietary laws that set them apart from their host culture, and passing down the knowledge that distinguished their professional expertise.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, the proportion of Apollonian and Mercurian occupations and their relative importance to the general economy changed dramatically. Specifically, industrial societies had a much greater need for Mercurian service providers, who quickly became the dominant professional class.

European Jews had traditionally fulfilled Mercurian functions and were therefore uniquely adapted to the economic and social upheavals of the nineteenth century. Indeed, notes Slezkine, Central-European Jews were soon enormously over-represented in Mercurian occupations, their percentage in the liberal professions often constituting up to tenfold their percentage in the population at large. They became, quite simply, indispensable to the industrial state: They provided it with financing, offered essential legal and medical services, and were highly influential in the media. Within the classes bound to Apollonian occupations, this only heightened an already existing animosity.<sup>9</sup>

Such were the conditions that led to the rise of modern antisemitism in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> If traditional anti-Jewish sentiment was couched in religious language, this new strain of antisemitism was deeply embedded in modern nationalism and its “blood and land” romanticism. Because of their speedy and successful influx into modern society, Jews were accused of being overly cerebral, dissociated, a foreign element wherever they resided. These antisemitic stereotypes reflected the threat experienced by Apollonian sectors such as the German Junkers, who felt the new industrial economy had rendered them irrelevant.

Zionism arose as a reaction to the Jewish condition in the nineteenth century, and as such is inextricably tied up with the rhetoric of modern

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nationalism. The impetus behind much of its ideology stems from the antisemitic notion of the fundamental unnaturalness of Jewish existence.<sup>11</sup> When early Zionist ideologues (such as Max Nordau and Micha Berdichevsky) characterized the diaspora Jew as effeminate and insufficiently physical, they were paradoxically (yet quite logically) reproducing the hostile stereotypes propagated by resentful Apollonians who had been dispossessed of their dominant role in their country's economy.<sup>12</sup>

Thus evolved what political theorist Avishai Margalit calls "orthopedic Zionism," which strove to correct the deformity associated with the diaspora Jew.<sup>13</sup> Labor Zionism tried to restore the Jew to health through agriculture, and Revisionism by reviving his sense of pride. Early Zionists also called for an amendment to their people's "inverted pyramid," demanding that Jews make a living no longer through their brains, but by the sweat of their brow.

All these endeavors had at their core a common Apollonian sentiment: the belief that Jews were somehow cut off from natural physical reality and could be cured of their ailments only by cultivating a healthy relationship to the land. At the time, however, the Apollonian way of life was already beginning to wane. The very values on which the Zionist mission was predicated were quickly becoming a thing of the past. The twentieth century was, in Slezkine's words, the "Jewish century": The traditionally Mercurian occupations became the leading force in all advanced economies, and Jews rose to positions of power and affluence hitherto unknown. This, though, was only the first in a series of socioeconomic transformations that would change the world.

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### III

Over a hundred years have passed since the birth of modern Jewish nationalism. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the world is, once again, in the throes of a socioeconomic revolution that is changing modern society in ways no less radical than the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> And Zionism's foundational ethos, which was out-moded to begin with and has remained staunchly Apollonian ever since, is now becoming all but obsolete.

At the crux of these ground-breaking developments is the information technology revolution, which has reshaped the global economy through a series of sweeping structural changes. Local financial systems have been integrated into a borderless, global network that allows for an ever quicker flow of capital. Corporations, which can now coordinate production across continents, have become thoroughly multinational. Most importantly, new technologies have given rise to the so-called creative sector, which is gradually dominating developed economies. This sector consists of a broad range of experts who assume responsibility for the creative—rather than the mechanical—aspects of their field, most noticeably in academia, higher management, the media, the liberal professions, and the rapidly growing high-tech and biotech industries.

The creative sector has, in turn, generated a new social phenomenon, labeled by economist Richard Florida as the “creative class.”<sup>15</sup> This class, says Florida, comprises over 30 percent of highly developed economies and must therefore be recognized as an independent division of the economy, along with agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Members of the creative class in all countries bear a number of common characteristics: They are typically liberal in temperament and require tolerance from the cities in which they live and the companies in which they work; they have high standards of all they consume, from food to culture, and expect a high

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quality of life for themselves and their families; they insist on first-rate education for their children; and they are highly mobile, gravitating toward the places best suited to their needs.

Because of the vital importance of the creative class to local economy, countries and cities eagerly compete for these gifted individuals, offering them the lifestyle and opportunities they desire. Indeed, according to Florida's findings, there is a high correlation between the extent of a country's creative activity and its overall economic performance (in fact, one of the major problems of Arab countries is that they have so far not been able to create the liberal, tolerant atmosphere that is essential for cultivating creative economies).<sup>16</sup>

The relationship between the creative class and the countries and cities that bid for its services is explained by legal theorist Philip Bobbitt's concept of the "market-state."<sup>17</sup> Bobbitt argues that much of the legitimacy accorded to the modern nation-state was a result of the material well-being it guaranteed its citizens. The relationship between state and citizen was therefore somewhat paternal, encouraging the latter's strong sense of loyalty and patriotism.

All this has changed dramatically over the past few decades. The emergence of modern communication technologies has considerably diminished the monopoly of national cultures and languages. Television enables the dissemination of foreign cultural production—primarily from the United States—into almost every home in the world. English has become the *lingua franca* of the financial and academic communities, thereby creating elite groups that are no longer defined by a particular national identity.<sup>18</sup>

The modern market-state, claims Bobbitt, has come to resemble a modern corporation. It is decentralized, and outsources whatever services can be provided more effectively by other organizations, from education to utilities and security. Its citizens see themselves as clients and expect good value for their money. Thus, while the market-state is primarily concerned with the provision of security, it must offer infrastructure, education, and management services as well. One of the central institutions of



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the modern nation-state, old-age pensions, is being gradually privatized not only in the United States but also in the European Union—once the main proponent of welfare policy.

Modern market-states, like corporations, can no longer conduct themselves as monopolies; the more capable their citizenry, the more mobile it is, and it tends to move to wherever the best opportunities lie. Hence, the central source of legitimacy for the market-state, says Bobbitt, is the “maximization of opportunities” for its clients, whether citizens or foreign workers.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, as the nation-state has given way to the market-state, the Apollonian worldview has been completely eclipsed by the prevailing Mercurian culture. This is the reality with which the Jewish state, founded on a distinctively Apollonian vision, must contend.

#### IV

While it is still Apollonian in ideology, in practice, Israel is very much Mercurian. It is, de facto, a market-state, and it has been so for quite some time. In their recent book *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle*, Dan Senor and Saul Singer document Israel's achievements on the knowledge-intensive technological front:

Technology companies and global investors are beating a path to Israel and finding unique combinations of audacity, creativity, and drive everywhere they look. Which may explain why, in addition to boasting the highest density of start-ups in the world (a total of 3,850 start-ups, one for every 1,844 Israelis), more Israeli companies are listed on the NASDAQ exchange than all companies from the entire European continent....

In 2008, per capita venture capital investments in Israel were 2.5 times greater than in the United States, more than 30 times greater than in Europe, 80 times greater than in China, and 350 times greater than in India.<sup>20</sup>

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Yet perhaps the best evidence of Israel's successful transformation into a market-state is the rapid expansion of the country's creative class. Over the past few decades, Israel has produced an elite cadre of well-trained, highly experienced professionals in a variety of fields: finance, marketing, technological R&D, and academic research. The global demand for these experts is enormous, and the opportunities open to them are vast.

Hence a large portion of Israel's population has become highly mobile. Estimates vary, but it is approximated that as many as one million Israelis are currently living abroad, most of them in the United States. Israeli expatriates come from all fields and socioeconomic levels of society. Many young Israelis emigrate because they see more opportunities for themselves abroad; they work in all manner of unskilled labor, selling goods from carts in shopping malls to moving and taxi services. Far more disturbing from Israel's point of view, however, is the emigration of a large number of highly qualified men and women—i.e., members of the creative class—in whose education the Jewish state has invested a great deal of resources and energy.

Israel's brain drain has been widely discussed and rigorously researched. According to economist Dan Ben-David, it is an unparalleled phenomenon in the Western world. Twenty-five percent of all researchers trained in Israel teach at foreign universities, many of them at top-tier American schools.<sup>21</sup> Most academics leave for a very simple reason: If they wish to do research in their field of interest, they need university funding and resources. While Israel produces a large number of PhDs, the number of tenure-track positions at Israeli universities has decreased in the last decade. Consequently, many gifted researchers, having completed post-doctoral training abroad, discover that they have no positions to which to return, and are forced to take whatever work they can find at foreign universities.

The academic brain drain is just one example of what has become a pervasive problem. Israel is fortunate to have a large pool of extremely talented people, and changes in the global economy over the past two decades have given many of them ample opportunity to express their genius. The majority of Israel's creative class is highly motivated to contribute to the country's

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economy—as long as it can do so in ways befitting its capabilities and education. While Israel justly prides itself on the intelligence and entrepreneurship of its citizenry, it must realize that, in the world of the market-state, it, too, has to compete for its citizens.

In the past Israel has tried to dissuade would-be expatriates through patriotically laden guilt. Jews who immigrated abroad were called *yordim* (“descenders”), a term with decidedly negative connotations. Underlying this rhetoric was the expectation that a sense of loyalty would lead those who had gone in search of greener pastures to eventually return home.

Unfortunately, such Apollonian rhetoric, with its moralizing overtones, has lost much of its potency. Israelis no longer feel inextricably bound to their homeland; all their patriotism and emotional attachment will not induce them to stay if greater prospects await them elsewhere. In the new Mercurian world in which we live, to expect anything different would be hopelessly naïve.

## V

Such are the facts, harsh and unalterable. To decry them would be about as effective as the laments of those in the nineteenth century that agrarian society had been more stable than the new urban lifestyles of the industrial economy. The question we must now ask is, what can be done about this new reality? What can Israel promise its fragmented and disillusioned citizenry? How can it entice its creative class, the engine of the country’s economic growth, to stay and contribute to its prosperity? What can it offer, both to its people and to the world at large, to preserve its edge in a competitive global market?

One thing is certain: Classical Zionism, with its Apollonian ideology and rhetoric, no longer serves as a unifying force in what has become

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a multicultural market-state. Israel's founding vision is now doubly out of step with socioeconomic reality. Not only has the country made the transition to an industrial state, thereby reducing its dependence on the land, but it has also gone on to adopt the knowledge economy of the twenty-first century.

The State of Israel has become predominantly Mercurian—and it is a good thing too, as no developed country today can remain Apollonian.<sup>22</sup> After all, Mercurian professions have become the mainstay of the global economy, and Israel has been at the forefront of this transition. In 1998, Tel Aviv was included in *Newsweek's* list of the world's top ten new high-tech cities.<sup>23</sup>

From a broad historical perspective, we seem to have come full circle. Jewish existence was Mercurian throughout most of its history. It was only classical Zionism, born at a specific historical moment when antisemitism denigrated Jewish Mercurianism as an aberration, that regarded the Jewish commitment to learning as a weakness and sought to replace it with more earthly pursuits.

Today, however, when the global economy is marked by a fluid, borderless dynamic, and Israel itself is a thriving creative market, Zionism must reclaim the Jewish tradition of intellectual excellence. This is the crux of KNI. The celebration of knowledge has always stood at the center of Jewish life; KNI seeks to reinstate it at the heart of the Israeli ethos. Crucially, it is not an abandonment, but a revision of the Zionist mission, recasting its Apollonian goals in Mercurian terms appropriate to the time.

Admittedly, KNI is at this point still only a statement of purpose, a general strategy for the future rather than a detailed program of how it may be realized. And yet, its contours may be outlined even at this rudimentary stage. It calls for Israel to place scientific research, technological development, and creative industry at the top of its priorities; to invest vast resources in education and culture; and to foster knowledge production in all fields.

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Though such an immense investment will no doubt be seen as a burden to a country with pressing economic and security needs, Israel cannot afford, in today's market economy, *not* to make it. On an immediate level, it is critical to the country's survival. In the long term, it may serve to bring Israel to the forefront of intellectual and industrial creativity, joining it to the illustrious line of cultural centers throughout the ages: Athens in the fifth century B.C.E., Alexandria some centuries later, Paris in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Vienna and Berlin at the *fin de siècle*, New York in the mid-twentieth century—all these cities prized the production of knowledge as an end in itself, regardless of instant economic gain.

However, any attempt to redefine the national vision cannot proceed through top-down ideological indoctrination. Such attempts are bound to fail, certainly in a culture characterized by such extreme divergence of opinion. To gain acceptance by Israeli society, a new unifying ideal must be (i) reflective of Israel's current sociocultural reality; (ii) rooted in a faithful representation of Jewish history; (iii) inclusive, providing a meaningful statement of identity for as many Israelis—and diaspora Jews—as possible; and (iv) inspiring, offering a sense of hope and direction for the future.

The vision of Israel as a knowledge-nation, I wish to argue, meets these four criteria.

First, it corresponds to the current state of Israeli society. As aforementioned, the country's economy has for the last two decades been driven by a growing creative sector. Israel has already become, to a great extent, a knowledge society. Although large segments of its population are not, as yet, included in the country's creative economy, the concept of a knowledge-nation is not elitist; it is in no way intended to defend the interests of privileged groups. On the contrary, it strives to broaden the base of the creative class, on whose size the country's economy depends.

It must also be emphasized that KNI is not a fig leaf for the kind of unbridled capitalism that leaves the weaker socioeconomic strata behind. There is nothing in the idea of a creative economy that denies the basic

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values of social solidarity and a strong commitment to the welfare of the population. It is a vision that can appeal both to supporters of social democracy and proponents of the free market, addressing the needs of the poor even as it fulfills the requirements of the wealthy.

Second, KNI is firmly grounded in one of the most distinctive traits of Jewish existence throughout the ages: the primacy of knowledge. Since its very beginning, Jewish tradition has prized learning and literacy.<sup>24</sup> Even in pre-rabbinic times, the ancient Hebrews boasted an open-access model of knowledge, and scholarship was never the exclusive province of the elites.<sup>25</sup> From the Second Temple period onward, learning ascended to even greater prominence as it became the backbone of Jewish life, its chief occupation and highest value. Communities invested tremendous resources in establishing yeshivot and batei midrash, primary education was a matter of course for every Jewish boy (even when the rest of the world was largely illiterate), and Torah scholars were regarded with utmost respect and admiration.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the great luminaries of Jewish history have been the producers and disseminators of knowledge, from Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi through Maimonides to Rabbi Haim of Brisk. To this, the last two centuries have added an impressive record of secular intellectual excellence. Since their acceptance into Western society, Jews have distinguished themselves in scientific and artistic circles, and they continue to do so to this day:<sup>27</sup> Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Heinrich Heine, Marcel Proust, Marc Chagall, Paul C elan, Franz Kafka, and Karl Krauss are only a few of the Jews who have made momentous contributions to Western arts and letters.

While the main thrust of this essay examines the prospects of KNI with the somewhat dry tools of social science, based on an assessment of Israel's current socioeconomic strengths and weaknesses, the ideal it seeks to advance is that of a vibrant nation. Israel's creativity and vitality go far beyond the success of its high-tech sector. Within a few decades, this young country has established a rich culture of music, literature, film, and theater. Its public discourse is conducted by a wide array of thinkers, writers, and

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pundits. Though this discourse is often aggressive and bitter, it reflects the tradition of *plugta*—the animated discussion and dispute that is a celebrated feature of Jewish heritage.

Third, the concept of a knowledge-nation is highly inclusive. It can speak to a whole spectrum of Jewish lifestyles and worldviews. It is, for reasons aforementioned, extremely relevant for the Jewish ultra-Orthodox world, predicated as it is on a culture of study. The Haredi sector could easily find its place in a knowledge society. Though many ultra-Orthodox Jews prefer to protect their children from the influence of the secular worldview, fields such as high tech, finance, or law pose no such threat, being all but divorced from questions of belief and philosophy. Indeed, an increasing number of Haredim today are taking courses in such fields as computer science, law, and accounting.<sup>28</sup>

KNI can also win the hearts of Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who cherish all forms of high culture, including science, literature, and music. In fact, the integration of these immigrants into Israeli society was facilitated by the dramatic expansion of the high-tech sector in the 1990s, made possible, among other things, by the *aliya* of a large number of highly trained engineers during this period.

Moreover, although deeply rooted in the Jewish experience, the notion of a knowledge society can speak to many of Israel's Arab citizens as well. A growing number of Israeli Arabs are taking part in the country's system of higher education, and many of them (though nowhere near enough) have already found their way into the creative sector.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, as opposed to today's dominant ethos, KNI has the power to inspire many, if not all, of the different elements of multicultural Israel: Jews and non-Jews, religious and secular, traditional as well as progressive. The great advantage of KNI is that, despite its uniquely Jewish character, it also has a strong universalist aspect. Its inclusiveness and ability to address a broad array of cultural traditions and lifestyles is the key to its success.

Finally, KNI provides both a strategy and a vision for Israel's future development. As a strategy, it presents the best route for economic growth.

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Given the country's lack of natural resources, its only viable avenue of investment is the creative sector, its industry of knowledge. At the same time, KNI offers a new vision, one both deeply anchored in Jewish history and highly relevant to Israel's new reality.

## VI

Yet KNI is not just an objective for the future. It is also a wake-up call for the present. Its emphasis on education presupposes a society that provides its citizens with the opportunity to realize their potential. Creative economies, because they depend on the talent and skill of the individual, invest a great deal in educating and training their populations. In doing so, they allow a growing number of people to express their individual gifts while contributing to society and the economy.

Thus, while the vision of a knowledge-nation attempts to transcend some of the historical changes instigated by Zionism, there are others it seeks keenly to preserve. The very conditions by which Israel has evolved into a thriving creative economy—the foundations of its current success—were laid by classical Zionism. KNI, in this respect, promotes a central tenet of the Zionist legacy: the fundamental importance of education.

The country's first leaders saw education as one of Israel's primary strategic goals. Misgivings about the overly cerebral character of diaspora Judaism notwithstanding, early Zionism perpetuated this vital aspect of the Jewish way of life. It did not ask whether it was economically viable to establish a department of Jewish philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; it just did. Intellectual giants such as Shmuel Hugo Bergman, Martin Buber, and Gershom Scholem set the highest standards of scholarly distinction in this field, even before the state was founded. Neither did the Zionist movement ask whether the nation needed historians, archaeologists, or pure (as



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opposed to applied) mathematicians.<sup>30</sup> It was accepted as a matter of course that it did; not because such research would further the country's economy, but because knowledge was to be pursued for its own sake.

Israel allocated tremendous resources to its educational systems, even at times of severe economic crisis. In this, it continued the diaspora communities' practice of financially supporting educational institutions and promising scholars. Just like the yeshivot and batei midrash of yore, modern Israel built schools and institutes of higher education that drew on both the ancient tradition of Jewish learning and the contemporary accomplishments of Jews in Western academia. As a result, Israeli education attained a level of excellence way out of proportion to its limited resources; in 1964, for instance, local high school students ranked first in the world in the study of mathematics.

Sadly, a shift in national priorities in the 1970s has caused a decline in Israel's investment in education, with catastrophic results. The academic standard, in both primary and secondary education, has fallen dramatically. The crisis is felt particularly within the country's ivory towers. Israel's academic system, once such a source of pride, now suffers from a severe financial breakdown, as well as the above-mentioned brain drain.

The figures are indeed troubling. According to a recent study by Ben-David on the state of higher education, in 1973 Israel had a population of roughly 3.25 million, of which there were 50,000 students taught by 4,389 senior academics. Today, Israel's population is 7.2 million, of which 250,000 are students taught by a faculty of fewer than 5,000.<sup>31</sup> While the population has more than doubled, and the number of students has multiplied by five, the number of senior academics has remained almost the same. Not to mention the fact that nearly half these senior academics are over 55 years old and will largely be retiring over the next decade.

Israel is losing its competitive edge and, as far as higher education is concerned, is extremely sub-par when compared to other advanced economies. Its student-faculty ratio is 2.4 times that of the United States.<sup>32</sup> The numbers are but a grim reflection of a reality every student

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and lecturer knows only too well. Four decades ago, studying at the Hebrew University was a profoundly enlightening experience. Professors were challenging and inspiring, and students had plenty of opportunity to avail themselves of their instructors' wisdom. Today, departments are pressured into accepting huge numbers of applicants, the shortage of professors precludes personal contact, and students are caught in a race for high grades, rarely pausing to ponder the significance of what they are learning.

The difference between the idealistic approach to education prevalent in the country's formative years and the current crisis is nothing less than staggering. Unfortunately, Israel does not seem to realize that when a country no longer values knowledge and culture for their own sake, it is in danger of losing its *raison d'être* altogether. KNI thus seeks to revive the Zionist quest for intellectual excellence—not as a nostalgic nod to a glorious past, but as a vital need that is becoming more and more urgent with time.

## VII

In addition to its obvious social and economic benefits, the vision of a knowledge-nation also stands to advance Israel's rather languid foreign policy. The obliging cooperation and diplomatic finesse traditionally evinced by the Jews of the diaspora in their dealings with the outside world have been successfully incorporated into Israel's business and academic transactions; KNI would encourage their adoption by the country's political echelons as well. If Israel is to become a cultural center, it must forge open and constructive ties with the international community.

Yet perhaps one of the greatest advantages of KNI is its potential to improve the Jewish state's flagging relations, not only with the world, but also with its brethren in the diaspora. Zionism, having unconsciously borrowed many of its central tenets from the antisemitic discourse of its time, came to

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reject diasporic existence and everything associated with it. While attempting to create a new identity, it diminished the old one; after all, two-thirds of Jewish history and the majority of its achievements occurred when there was no sovereign national entity.

Identity, whether individual or collective, is always left severely impaired by the rejection of the history upon which it is based. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the myth of the “new Jew,” born of the eradication of the “old Jew,” has played a highly destructive role in Israel’s short history.<sup>33</sup> The old Jew, depicted by Apollonian Zionism as weak, effeminate, and helpless, has continued to haunt Israel’s psyche throughout the country’s desperate struggle for survival.

More than sixty years after its founding, Israel no longer ought to feel it necessary to disparage the diaspora.<sup>34</sup> The claim that Jewish communities abroad suffer from a diminished sense of national identity is unfair and unfounded—as is the claim that their existence is in some way unhealthy or neurotic.<sup>35</sup> Admittedly, the history of world Jewry is rife with persecution and suffering. Yet in presenting it as a dark tale of shame and humiliation, the Zionist narrative considerably narrows the horizons of Jewish consciousness.

It is imperative that the Jewish state adopt a more balanced view of the history of its people. The diaspora, after all, harbored most of the elements that have turned Israel into the vital, successful society it is: a love of learning, entrepreneurial drive, and keen creative instincts. Israel has long outgrown the ideology that distinguishes “old Jew” and “new Jew.” As its own experience has proven, the mind is not the enemy of the body, nor is learning the antithesis of self-defense. Such perceptions have no place in Israel’s renewed ethos as a knowledge society.

With its emphasis on knowledge, learning, and culture, KNI can begin to rectify the Israeli misapprehension of the diaspora. The charged relationship between Israel and world Jewry has been widely described and diagnosed.<sup>36</sup> For many years this relationship relied too heavily on bad conscience, on the guilt felt by those who had not participated in the creation

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and defense of the state. Yet shame and remorse cannot be the building blocks of a prosperous national society, one that will appeal to young Jews who do not care to carry the psychological burden of past generations.

KNI, in this sense, not only serves as a unifying vision for the country's citizens, but might also create new opportunities for Israelis and diaspora Jews to come together. The ideal of a knowledge-nation has the potential to become a new joint venture for Jews worldwide, one based not on guilt, but on a common passion and shared hopes.

Of course, the concept of KNI leaves many questions unanswered: For example, what kind of knowledge should be cultivated by the Israeli enterprise? What sort of balance ought to be achieved between the religious canon of rabbinical literature and the secular disciplines of the humanities and sciences? How will KNI, and the market-state on which it is based, determine questions of citizenship and civil rights? And to what extent should KNI be reflected in the country's legal and political systems?

Many of these questions have long been contentious, and KNI does not propose to resolve them all immediately. They will have to be debated and ultimately determined by public discussion. Yet while KNI is not the *deus ex machina* that will make all the conflicts disappear, there is good reason to hope that it will equip us with a strong sense of purpose so lacking today—all, to quote Ahad Ha'am, "for the sake and for the glory of the great idea."

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## Notes

1. Ahad Ha'am, "The Wrong Way," in Hans Kohn, ed., *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic: Basic Writings of Ahad Ha'am*, trans. Leon Simon (New York: Schocken, 1962), p. 36.

2. For an in-depth analysis of this process, see Shmuel Eisenstadt, *The Transformation of Israeli Society: An Essay in Interpretation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1985).

3. The precise aspects of classical Zionism to which I am referring will be delineated in the course of the essay. For an excellent summary of the fundamentals of Zionist ideology, see Shlomo Avineri, *Varieties of Zionist Thought* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1980) [Hebrew].

4. This idea of the "belated" arrival of a nation-state on the historical scene is discussed in Helmut Plessner, *The Belated Nation*, second ed. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1959) [German].

5. See, for example, Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1983); Liah Greenfeld, *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2001); Carlton J.H. Hayes, *A Political and Social History of Europe* (New York: Macmillan, 1926); E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1990); and Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-Nationalism* (London: NLB, 1977).

6. For an interesting study of how ethnic groups were welded into a completely new entity, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, revised ed. (London: Verso, 2003).

7. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton: Princeton, 2004), p. 24.

8. Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, p. 7.

9. Slezkine, *Jewish Century*, pp. 40-104.

10. Leon Poliakov, *A History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. 4, *Suicidal Europe 1870-1933*, trans. George Klin (New York: Vanguard, 1985).

11. Anita Shapira, *New Jews, Old Jews* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), pp. 175-191 [Hebrew].

12. See, in this context, Sander Gilman, *Jewish Self Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1986).

13. Personal communication with Avishai Margalit, August 2009.

14. For a comprehensive analysis of this revolution, see Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Peter Sloterdijk, *In the*

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*Weltinnenraum of the Capital* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005) [German]; Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Anchor, 2003); and Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Knopf, 2008). A more popular account may be found in Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1999).

15. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic, 2002).

16. After completing his study in the United States, Florida was commissioned by the European Union to conduct another study that, ultimately, replicated his U.S. findings. See Richard Florida and Irene Tinagli, *Europe in the Creative Age* (London: Demos, 2004). On the failure of Arab countries to cultivate creative economies, see the *Arab Human Development Report*, United Nations Development Programme (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2002).

17. Bobbitt, *Shield of Achilles*.

18. Former U.S. labor secretary Robert Reich refers to these groups as a new class of “international symbolic analysts,” in contrast to the national symbolic analysts, who are bound by the local language of the nation-state. See Robert Reich, “The New Rich-Rich Gap,” *American Prospect*, December 12, 2005, [www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the\\_new\\_richrich\\_gap](http://www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_new_richrich_gap).

19. See Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent*, pp. 23-124.

20. Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start-Up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle* (New York: Twelve, 2009), pp. 11-12.

21. Dan Ben-David, “Brain Drained,” *Centre for Economic Policy Research*, March 22, 2008, p. 3.

22. It must be noted, though, that Israel's flourishing agricultural sector remains an important part of the country's economy.

23. Steve Levy, “The Hot New High-Tech Cities,” *Newsweek*, November 9, 1998.

24. Nathan Drazin, *History of Jewish Education from 515 B.C.E. to 220 C.E.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1940). For a description of post-Enlightenment Jewish education, see Jay R. Berkovitz, *The Shaping of Jewish Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1989).

25. Amos Funkenstein and Adin Steinsaltz, *Sociology of Ignorance* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1987) [Hebrew].

26. See Immanuel Etkes, ed., *Yeshivot and Batei Midrash* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2006) [Hebrew]. For post-Enlightenment developments, see Berkovitz, *Shaping of Jewish Identity*.

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27. Over 85 percent of American Jewish high-school graduates pursue a college education. See Steven Bayme, *Jewish Arguments and Counterarguments: Essays and Addresses* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 2002), p. 83.

28. See, in this context, Joel Rebibo, "The Road Back from Utopia," *AZURE* 11 (Summer 2001), pp. 131-167.

29. "Annual Report 31/32 for 2003-4 and 2004-5," published by The Council for Higher Education in Israel (Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 89-136 [Hebrew].

30. See Shaul Katz, "Berlin Roots—Zionist Incarnation: The Ethos of Pure Mathematics and the Beginnings of the Einstein Institute of Mathematics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem," *Science in Context* 17:1-2 (Spring-Summer 2004), pp. 199-234.

31. Ben-David, "Brain Drained," p. 3. Ben-David makes a convincing case for the economic benefits of investing in higher education. His extensive work on the subject may be found at [www.tau.ac.il/~danib/index.html](http://www.tau.ac.il/~danib/index.html).

32. Ben-David, "Brain Drained," p. 15.

33. Carlo Strenger, *The Designed Self* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic, 2004), pp. 99-126.

34. The term "diaspora," incidentally, is not only preferable to the derogatory "exile;" it is also more historically accurate. The notion that Jews were exiled during the Roman period evolved in the high Middle Ages. It has a peculiarly strong hold on the Jewish imagination, in spite of compelling evidence to the contrary. See Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

35. In this respect I strongly disagree with A.B. Yehoshua's statements about Jewish existence in the diaspora. Not only were they highly undiplomatic, they were also unfaithful to reality. For an English translation of Yehoshua's controversial essay, see A.B. Yehoshua, "An Attempt to Identify the Root Cause of Antisemitism," *AZURE* 32 (Spring 2008), pp. 48-79.

36. See, for example, Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), pp. 162-172.