



Conflicting visions for the State of Israel

AS WE celebrate Israel's 73rd Independence Day, we are mindful that the State of Israel in 1948 was a dream fulfilled for Jews all over the world. Some saw it as a religious miracle, as a form of divine intervention in Jewish history. Others saw it as the fulfillment of the national aspirations of the Jewish people in modern times. Still others saw it through mostly idealistic utopian lenses, which were often so dreamy that they were highly detached from the emerging reality on the ground.

A comprehensive new book by Rabbi Marc Rosenstein studies and analyzes this history, with a focus also on the present and the future of Israeli society. Entitled *Contested Utopia: Jewish Dreams and Israeli Realities*, it provides a fascinating look at the variety of utopian visions that abounded before the creation of the state of Israel. In so doing, the author helps us understand the diverse political, social and religious movements that struggle for the soul of the Jewish state until this day. Not only does Rosenstein present many different utopian understandings of what the state of Israel might have or should have become, but he confronts us with the many questions and dilemmas that arise from an overdose of utopian thinking.

What is meant by utopia or utopian thinking?

In Western culture, hundreds of authors have used a literary tool known as utopia in which they have their heroes visit an imaginary society in a far-off land or a future time to express criticism of the status quo and offer proposals for how society could be improved. In addition, we Jews have had our share of utopian thinking, from the beginning of our history and much of it has related to how we envisioned a future Jewish state. According to Rosenstein:

Throughout the centuries, the vision of the Jewish state has been a utopian image in which collective memory, desire, hope and faith will converge to create an ideal life for the Jewish people in the land of Israel. But in the course of those centuries, 'ideal' was not consistently understood. Ambivalence and even discord entered into dreams of the Jewish state. There were different opinions and schools of thought regarding not only what we desired but even what we remembered.

As Rosenstein portrays clearly and vividly throughout this book, these different schools of thought and the many different opinions that they represent continue to be present in contemporary Israel. This is one of the many reasons that we have so many unresolved problems and perpetual dilemmas in our national life. It is very hard

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Rabbi Marc Rosenstein

to reach consensus on basic common values when we have so many radically divergent ideas in the background.

There is one basic problem with utopian thinking. Rosenstein calls it the utopian dilemma. It has to do with the purposes and intents of imagining a future Jewish state. Accordingly, Rosenstein postulates that there is one key question that needs to be asked about utopian plans for the idea Jewish state: What is our real intention in articulating this vision? In other words, is the envisioning process just a literary way of thinking? Or is it meant to be a process that leads to practical planning which will develop a model Jewish state, or at least strive to do so?

Rosenstein brings his own academic training, educational experience and writing skills to bear in writing this thought-provoking book. As a trained Jewish historian, with a doctorate in Jewish History from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he is a keen observer and analyst of Jewish History, about which he wrote his last book *Turning Points in Jewish History* (Jewish Publication Society, 2018). In that book as well as the current one, he consistently reveals himself as a consummate educator, always prodding the reader to think deeply and personally about the subject at hand, and always

raising a multitude of questions for us to be contemplating. Furthermore, as an excellent writer – he wrote a blog called Galilee Diary for 17 years – his style is not heavy or cumbersome, but refreshing and always interesting. Therefore, this book is both profound and enjoyable at the same time.

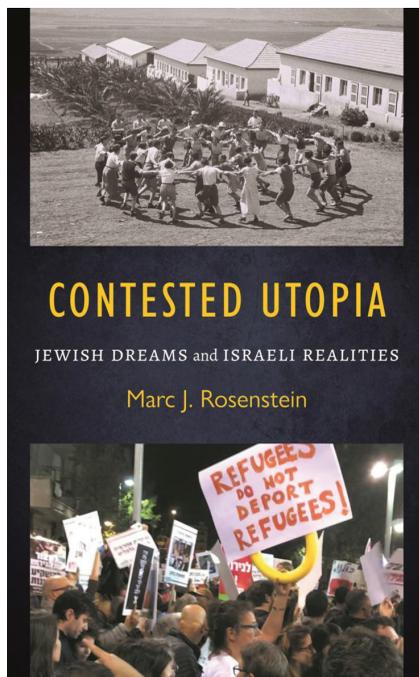
Also, Rosenstein has lived in Israel for the last 30 years – in the community of Shorashim in the Misgav region in the Western Galilee – and therefore he writes from a life fully lived in Israel about the many dilemmas we face here as we strive to develop a delicate balance between desire and hope, between utopian image and practical action. In so doing, he raises many questions for us to think about such as:

How should a modern Jewish state relate to the Jewish religion, its rituals and moral imperatives? How should we read God's biblical promise of sovereignty from the Sinai to the Euphrates over against our – and the world's – longing for peace, fairness and stability? How do we reconcile the biblically rooted idea of a homogeneous Jewish polity with the obligation to see all humanity as created in God's image?

Rosenstein deals with these questions and many more in his thorough review of many versions of Jewish utopias that led up to the founding of the state of Israel, from the Torah's visions of utopia, to Herzl's Altneuland, to Nachum Syrkin's ideas about a socialist Jewish state, and more. By bringing substantial excerpts from many of these utopian sources, we get a feel for the amazing amount of idealistic dreaming that preceded us. At the same time, these visions are examined in critical ways and in dialectic fashion, so that the reader can garner a deep understanding of how they conflict and contrast with one another.

Rosenstein is not only a historian and an educator. He is also a visionary. Accordingly, at the end of the book, he presents his own vision of the State of Israel in the form of an imaginary travelogue. He does it to provoke the reader to think about the kind of state we would like to have here. He wants to catalyze a discussion that he believes is important for our future. In the introduction to this section, he tells his readers that if they don't find that his utopia articulates what they hoped for regarding Israel, they are encouraged to envision their own utopias, to enrich the discussion which he believes we all must have.

I liked many aspects of Rosenstein's utopia but I particularly liked



CONTESTED UTOPIA

JEWISH DREAMS and ISRAELI REALITIES

Marc J. Rosenstein

Contested Utopia: Jewish Dreams and Israeli Realities

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his vision for the end of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In this section, he dreams big by imagining the end of the conflict. In his imagination the nation-state of the Jewish people also becomes a state for all of its citizens! A solution to this previously intractable conflict comes about! How did this happen?

The turning point came when grassroots movements in both nations arose with the explicit agenda of shifting the discourse from one of competitive victimhood to one of competing visions.

Wow! What a great idea! Would that this would only become the new reality in our region!

Without a vision, we will have a purposeless state, with no anchors and no common ground. Rosenstein is courageous enough to offer his vision for the future, which is both fascinating and fun. I actually think that part of the reason he did it was just to have some fun. And it is truly enjoyable to read his utopian thoughts for a better state of Israel for all of us.

Why is all of this important?

I think that this kind of re-envisioning is necessary these days since we are facing so much dystopian thinking, the opposite of utopian dreaming. So much of our current political discourse in Israel in recent years is negative, inciteful, demeaning, blaming and leading us nowhere. There seem to be no solutions to so many of our vexing problems: how to make peace with the Palestinians for our mutual benefit; how to create a state that is really Jewish and democratic, that upholds Jewish values and at the same time cares for the welfare of all of its citizens; how to be part of universalistic human culture and at the same time retain our unique particular Jewish identity.

This book will be extremely useful for adult education in the Diaspora and in Israel, as well as for university courses in Israel studies. The author has also developed a study and discussion guide which is available on the internet at the JPS website.

This daring and challenging new book is rooted in history but raises our consciousness about many critical issues in contemporary Israel at the same time that it looks to the future with both idealism and realism. This is what makes this an important book for all who care about the present dilemmas facing the State of Israel, as well as those who want to dream and work for a better life for all of Israel's citizens for the long term. ■