

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / Israel at 75: Miracles and Madness

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you. As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country. That is why I'm so excited to announce that the free press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the Historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles. The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed. Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry. They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader. I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited. This is going to be an amazing night. It's a chance to meet other people in the real world who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show. You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates). Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates). I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person. And now, here's the show. This is Honestly. Seventy-five years ago this week, the Jewish community of Palestine, known as the Yeshua, gathered in the Art Museum of Tel Aviv, then a city of less than 200,000 people, in order to perform a kind of political resurrection. 37 people, 36 men and one woman, were about to sign Israel's Declaration of Independence, which would reestablish Jewish political sovereignty in the Holy Land for the first time since the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem 2000 years before. They gathered in that hot, dark museum just three years after the liberation of Auschwitz. Just three years after six million Jews were murdered in Europe. Israel was established as a place where the Jewish people could at last self-govern, control their own fate, and their own safety. But more than that, in the land of Israel, there was a sense not just among religious Jews, but among all Jews, that the Jewish people were finally going home. The ink was barely dry on the declaration, with the armies of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and even Iraq, which didn't even share a border with the new state, attacked Israel from every direction. Though Israel had a miraculous victory in that war, 75 years later, the conflict rages on. We'll make to our special coverage here on I-24 News.

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Rockets were fired at Tel Aviv last night, but they were intercepted. This multi-day offensive by Israel is the deadliest operation in Gaza in nearly a year. But throughout its 75 years, whether it was left or right governing the country, Israel has always prided itself on being the world's only Jewish democracy, on being a liberal democracy in a sea of undemocratic regimes. Which helps explain why hundreds of thousands of Israelis are worried that that identity, an identity that Israelis pride themselves on and have defended for all of their existence, is in danger. This is an emergency time for the democracy of Israel, and we hold here to fight for the liberal democracy and our rights in the Jewish state. Because of the plans of Benjamin Netanyahu that want to turn this nation into a dictatorship. The crisis began last fall, when Benjamin Netanyahu was re-elected as Israel's prime minister, making him the longest tenured leader in the country's history. But in order to build his coalition, Bibi brought in far-right figures, figures who were previously regarded as at the very extremes of Israeli politics. Now these characters remain streamed, which many Israelis found objectionable and unforgivable. What we are doing here tonight is protesting against the government, wants to get all the power to itself, and take all the rights from our citizens. And this is why we're here, fighting for our democracy. Everyone here served in the army, and they are serving too, and we are going to protect the democracy. We are here for the democracy. Not here for the democracy. Thank you very much. Then, just weeks after being sworn in, Netanyahu made plans to overhaul the country's judicial system, which critics allege would end all checks and balances in Israel's government, and make it something more like Poland or Hungary. One of those critics was Netanyahu's own defense minister. Mass demonstrations have taken place in several Israeli cities after the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, sacked his defense minister. Yoav Galant was dismissed after he called for controversial plans. Who was fired less than 24 hours after making his criticisms known. It was a sudden outpouring of rage. Hordes of protesters continued to fill the streets in the early hours of the morning. Demonstrations have been going on in Israel for months, but these protests were spontaneous as people surged. All of this has led hundreds of thousands of Israelis to take to the streets, to protest Bibi, to protest the judicial reform, and to protest what many of them feel could be the end of Israel as they have understood it. And they're all waving Israeli flags. They're all chanting and demanding one thing. Democracy. One of those people is my guest today, Daniel Gordis, rabbi, academic, American Israeli,

and the author of eight books, including the just published book, Impossible, and the author of eight books, including the just published book, Impossible, and the author of eight books, including the just published book, Impossible, and the author of eight books, including the just published book, Impossible, and the author of eight books, including the just published book, Impossible, and the author of eight books,

has Israel fulfilled its founder's dreams.

On today's episode, Danny helps us make sense of this complicated, tumultuous, beautiful, enraging, and often indecipherable place.

What did its founders envision 75 years ago?

Has their dream been fulfilled?

How did the Jewish people manage to become a world economic powerhouse after two in every three European Jews had been slaughtered?

And in light of the ongoing political turmoil, what does the future of this small, miraculous country, the homeland for Jews around the world, both Jewish and democratic, hold?

One note about today's conversation. Israel is a huge subject. We could do five hours with Danny about the endless conflict with the Palestinians or the place of religious Jews in Israeli life or on Israel's changing demography. I'm hoping to cover those subjects in future episodes, but for today, I wanted to focus on the urgent political crisis within Israel

and what it says about the future of the country. There's a lot to get into. Stay with us.

Hi, honestly, listeners. I'm here to tell you about an alternative investing platform called Masterworks. I know investing in finance can be overwhelming, especially given our economic climate. But there's one thing that will never go in the red, and that is a painting from Picasso's Blue Period. Masterworks is an exclusive community that invests in blue chip art.

They buy a piece of art, and then they file that work with the SEC. It's almost like filing for an IPO. You buy a share representing an investment in the art. Then Masterworks holds the piece for three to 10 years, and then when they sell it, you get a prorated portion of the profit's minus fees. Masterworks has sold \$45 million worth of art to date from artists like Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Monet. Over 700,000 investors are using Masterworks to get in on the art market, so go to masterworks.com slash honestly for priority access. That's masterworks.com slash honestly. You can also find important regulation aid disclosures at masterworks.com slash cd.

Danny Gordes, welcome to Honestly. Barry, it's great to be with you. Thanks for having me.

Danny, just this morning, today's May 10th, I woke up to messages and tweets of friends living in Israel or visiting in Israel, running for cover, or talking about how they were hearing sort of booms outside of their apartment buildings in Tel Aviv. Apparently Gaza loved 100 Rockets at Tel Aviv this morning. I wonder how you are? How are your friends and family, and does it ever become normal to live in a place where every few months or sometimes sooner bomb sirens go off, a person is stabbed on a bus, a terrorist rams his car into a family driving home? You moved to Israel 25 years ago. Does this state of life ever become normal, especially when you're coming from a city like Los Angeles?

It doesn't become normal, but you learn that you're safe. In other words, the odds of anything happening to you are very low. It's distressing. It's sad. There's always a horrible human cost to this. In this particular instance, there's a human cost on the Palestinian side. I know Israelis have been killed in this round, but as you pointed out, Israelis have been killed in a round of terror

before. It's a grinding conflict. It's tragic, but it's just life here.

The strange thing about this moment is that when I mention the conflict, I could be talking about Israel's conflict with the Palestinians, the Gazans, with people in the West Bank, or I could be talking about the still peaceful, but kind of intense civil war that's raging inside Israel right now. Let's talk about that because the external conflict, the one that we began this conversation with, that's not new, but the thing that's happening inside Israel, that is very new. I recently heard you give a talk at an American synagogue, and this is the kind of place and crowd where being pro-Israel is the norm, where teenagers go on milestone high school trips to Israel, where parents give money to plant trees to make the desert bloom, and broadly speaking, are great defenders of the Jewish homeland. In the first few minutes of that talk, you said this, Israel is a country right now awash with hate. It's sort of a shocking statement to say to that crowd, and it's especially shocking coming from you, a rabbi who moved with your whole family, at what I imagine to some extent was great cost and some risk. 25 years ago, you moved from Los Angeles to Jerusalem. For the many listeners who have sort of been following what's been going on in Israel of late, maybe they've read headlines about the protest, about Netanyahu's judicial coup, about the destruction of the startup nation, but kind of that's about it. Give us the big picture. When you say that Israel, the country you love so much, is awash with hate, what do you mean by that?

Let's start with a few basic stages of how we went from Netanyahu's election on November 1st to how we got here. The first stage was his putting together a government which included three people, at least, who until he included them had been considered anathema by the normal Israeli crowd. Even people on the right would have said that people like Batsalo Smotrich, who is, he says about himself, he says openly, I'm a fascist. There's Itamar Ben-Gvir, who speaks openly about erasing Palestinian villages from the map. There's Avi Ma'oz, who is fanatically anti-LGBTQ and unapologetic about it. These are all people who were kind of political curiosities before this most recent election and BB because he needed a coalition. Some people would say because he needed a coalition to make sure that he would remain prime minister so that he could not

be jailed if he's convicted for any of the indictments that he's currently facing, he brought them into the government and he normalized that. That was the first move that made many rank and file Israelis feel this country is changing in a very profound way.

Danny, let's kind of set the stage for people a little bit. Benjamin Netanyahu is the longest serving prime minister in Israeli history. He's served for something like 15 years, also a former guest on this podcast. He's beloved by half the country. He's despised by the other half like most politicians, but it wasn't until this last election that he seemed for many people to jump the shark. Explain why he brought in the figures that you've just mentioned. What caused this change

in BB's politics? What makes this current administration and approach fundamentally different from former Netanyahu administrations? Well, there are different theories about what actually animates him. The most common theory, which may be right, may be wrong, is that he's worried about his own legal welfare and he's facing indictments on several different counts. They're all very complicated. The prosecution has mishandled some of them. It's not at all clear that he's going to get convicted, but according to Israeli law, if he is prime minister, he cannot be convicted and jailed. And BB knows that there's nobody here who's above the law and therefore

he was trying, many people say, to make sure he'd stay in office and therefore he'd be immune for the possibility of conviction going to jail, etc. Other people are not as convinced that that's the case. Some people believe, no, he actually believes that he's the best person for Israel. The last five elections have essentially been referenda on BB. There were no other platforms. There was no issue of judicial reform or changing the policy with the Palestinians or changing the economy. It was all, are you for BB or against BB? You said in the question that, you know, half the country loves him, half the country hates him. At that point, that was basically true. All five elections have been separated by a very small number of percentage points. And in this particular instance, the center left made some very, very basically amateurish mistakes by not getting parties to run together. So they lost a whole bunch of parties that got votes, but didn't make the threshold. And BB's a very smart guy, and he did not want to make the mistake and lose the votes of small fringe right-wing parties. So he brought them in and said, let's run as one party. So therefore, even if you fall below the 3.25% that you need to get into the Knesset, your votes won't be lost. So he brought them in. Some would say, because he really genuinely believes that he's the best person to protect, save, run, direct, etc., the state of Israel. And out of that sense, he felt he needed to do this so that he could keep the job and do his best for the Jewish state. And other people feel that he's actually not who he was. There are many people who actually believe that something's going on with him that we don't know yet. But there was a change. There was a fundamental change in BB's personality in the way that he's comporting himself. Look, he's clearly been outfoxed by these three people that he brought in on the far right in a way that he had never been outfoxed before. I mean, he said on your podcast, I've been Prime Minister for 15 years, the longest serving Prime Minister of Israel. Often I was, you know, I heard these doom projections and none of them materialized. I maintained Israel's democratic nature. I maintained Israel's traditions. This Israel is not going to be governed by Talmudic law. We're not going to ban LGBT forums. As you know, my view on that is sharply different to put it mildly. And we're going to remain a country of laws. I govern through the principles that I believe in. You know, don't worry, I'm in control of this. And there was actually every reason to believe him because he had always been in control. But he's not. He's not running the country. He's not running the party. He's been unable to get judicial reform through or get it stopped. He's kind of lost control of the helm. And we won't know for a long time what really animated this change, but he brought about a change in Israeli politics. And now, by the way, half the country does not love him. If we were to go to the polls tomorrow, he would lose and he would lose handsomely. So you have said that it was unforgivable that Bibi led in some of these politicians. Itamar Ben-Gavir is one of these people. This is a man who was once a member of a political party that was deemed a terrorist organization by Israel. And also the U.S., this is a person who idolized an evil man, Baruch Goldstein, the Israeli-American terrorist, who in 1994 murdered 29 innocent Palestinians as they were praying. There's a guy called Avima Oz, although he's since resigned. This is the leader of a far-right party whose main goal is anti-gay activism. Then there is the unbelievably named Betzalel Smutrik. This is a guy who opposes Palestinian statehood. Okay, fine. That puts him on the Israeli right. He has said there's no such thing as the Palestinian people and has called himself a proud fascist. So the right wing in Israel is really right wing, right? Even the labor party in Israel is by American standards sort of center right. So what makes these people

fundamentally different and unforgivable than the typical Israeli right wing politician? I think there's a kind of discourse that is permissible at the highest echelons of a functioning country that wants to be taken seriously in the international community. And that discourse does not permit certain kinds of people to represent the country. It's similar here. A state of Israel that prides itself on being tolerant can certainly abide people who do not want there to be a Palestinian state. I mean, I don't personally agree with that really completely, but I don't think there's going to be one, but it's not because I don't want there to be one. But that's a legitimate position for a whole array of reasons. You could even, I think theoretically say, I don't believe that historically there's a Palestinian people and they ought to be absorbed into Jordan or Syria. Again, not a popular view, but not an untenable academic view. But what you can't say is in 2023, there is something sick about gay and lesbian people and they're anathema to what the Jewish state wants to be. You can't say in 2023 anymore in a democratic Western state, even if it's not physically in the West, it's certainly intellectually in the West. I want to turn Israel into a halachic state, meaning a state governed by a Jewish law, meaning a Jewish Iran. That just puts you in a different caliber. When you are a person who actually openly reveres, as you pointed out, Baruch Goldstein, who's a mass murderer and you're not, forget, much less than not distancing yourself from him, you actually actively still honor his memory. There's a way in which any decent society has to cast you out to the margins and they were always on the margins. It's a democracy. They have a right to run for office. They have a right to get their votes. But a person like Bibi Netanyahu, who has been the darling of the West in many ways, knows full well that the minute you bring those people into your government, you're changing the image of Israel completely. I don't think that Tom Friedman was entirely unjustified in writing in the Times after this happened. The Israel that we knew was gone. I don't think it's gone. I think these people are going to be repudiated ultimately, and I think that Bibi is, because he allowed them in, going to be repudiated himself ultimately. But Friedman wasn't wrong that if they became part of the new norm, that's not the Israel that I chose to move to. That's not the Israel that you've spent a lot of time in. It's just not the Israel that we're proud of. So this was a huge shift in the kind of image that any Prime Minister was willing for Israel to have internationally. So that was the first bad omen. The second thing that happened is the judicial reform. In January, Israel's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice announced the government's plans to overhaul Israel's judicial system. Now, we could spend three hours here in the weeds. I'd like not to do that, but in brief broad strokes, can you explain to listeners what this reform proposed?

The reform proposed changes in four areas. I'm going to focus only on two of them. The two areas that were really critical were changing the composition of the committee that chooses judges, and this committee chooses judges from the Supreme Court down to the lowest municipal court in Israel. The same committee chooses all the judges. The pro-reform people would say it's controlled by the judiciary so that it continues its own sort of reproduces itself. Others would say that the judiciary has a veto because they have enough people in the form of three justice to three Supreme Court justices who sit on the committee plus two members of the bar. So between the five of them who kind of represent the judicial world, if they don't back a candidate, that candidate can't be approved. But the proposal here was to basically flip it and give all the power to the

government. And the idea, don't forget that Israel has a unicameral parliament unlike the United States Congress, which has a House and a Senate. We are a unicameral body. We also have no executive.

The executive and the legislative are in one body here. So it's unicameral. It's the executive and the legislative put together. Now the proposal was take the judiciary and have the judges appointed by the executive plus legislative branch. This means there's no balance of power. There's no checks and balances. And it effectively means that the government can do whatever it wants because

there's nobody to tell it that it can't. And that leads us to the fourth element, which was getting rid of judicial review. Judicial review is always by definition in the United States also. It's by definition a fundamentally non-democratic impulse because it's meant to be a pushback on the elected body. Those proposals both suggested that the government should have control over who

the appointees for the court are and that there'd be no judicial review. And so what that meant, Barry, is like right now, let's say right now, we're talking May 2023. And the Knesset votes that we're making illegal gay and lesbian relationships. I mean, in five seconds the Supreme Court strikes that down and says we can't do that. I mean, there's a whole array of legal reasons that you can't do that. But if the reforms were to go through, who's going to say, no, you can't do that? Who pushes back on you? Who protects the rights of minorities? Whether it be sexual orientation or Israeli Arabs or immigrants or Ethiopians or foreign workers or whatever the case may be. And this was kind of sprung on the Israeli populace. Although BB denies this, most authoritative people have said that he actually didn't raise the issue a single time in the entire election campaign. So there are many fairly with it voters who believe themselves to be competent voters who are up on the issues, had no idea this was brewing, and it was sprung. And as many of our listeners probably know, hundreds of thousands of Israelis are in the streets every Saturday night. And occasionally beyond that, and there are blocking highways and pilots have refused to train in the Air Force. And 270 leading Israeli economists have said, it's going to tank the economy. Moody's and Bloomberg have both downgraded the predictions of Israel's economy. The academic world here is saying that it's going to be the end of academia. The pushback from every possible area has said to be, you're going to destroy this country, you're actually going to completely upend it. And when I said that it's a country you'll wash and hate, the right feels, who are these people taking to the streets? Who lost a democratic election? Nobody's claiming the election was stolen. Nobody's claiming votes weren't counted right. It was a good old fashioned, legitimate democratic election. And they say, what's wrong with you? You're just sore losers. And now you're taken to the streets with Israeli flags and blocking highways. But that's not how democracy works. You lost. Now, I personally think that that's mostly right, unless you're trying to pass a legislative agenda that fundamentally alters the democratic nature of the country. Then I think that that argument falls short. And what the left would say is, yes, you're the right. And so if you want to change some economic policies, you're in power. Go right ahead. You want to make a new deal with Saudi Arabia after the EU? Go ahead and do that. You want to do this. You want to do that. That's fine. That's normal legislative behavior. But when you're talking about changing how we appoint judges and then getting rid of judicial review, that's wrong. It's just not judicial reform. This is regime change, they argue. And you were not elected to change the regime.

So for people who haven't seen images of these protests, I mean, they're absolutely enormous. I mean, we're talking about hundreds of thousands of people started off lasting for days, turned into weeks, turned into months. And it's in Tel Aviv, but there's also been protests all over the country. Jerusalem, Haifa, Bersheva, Herzliya. There were 63 places, I think, last week, there were protests. Danny, I don't think of you as a man of the left, right? I think of you as sort of center right broadly, maybe centrist. And yet you're one of the people who's showing up with your wife to protest the Netanyahu government. When did you join the protests? What are you protesting? Why do you continue to show up with your family? I'm protesting a proposal that would end Israel's democracy. It's just that simple. The proposals, which I don't think you're going to go through anymore, but had they gone through, they would have literally ended Israel's existence as a liberal democracy. Liberal not meaning left wing, liberal meaning functioning as a democracy the way the United States, France, England, Germany, et cetera, all function. I had no intention. I had no interest in toppling the government. I don't think that Israel needs elections now. I didn't vote for Netanyahu, but that's okay. I actually never voted for a person who won an Israeli election, even though I've had many opportunities to try. That's just the way it goes. But I was not protesting and I'm still not protesting to bring down the government or do anything except to block this anti-democratic legislation. And the minute the legislation gets taken off the table, I for one will not be at the protests anymore. There may still be protests because now it's turned into a huge anti-BB thing and that may continue until he fades away, but I will not be at the protests at that point. The minute the legislation is not on the issue, I'll be home watching Netflix on Saturday nights.

So the protests were going on really steadily and in late March, BB did something like essentially pouring gasoline onto this raging fire. That was when he suddenly fired his own party's Minister of Defense, seemingly because that person spoke out against the proposed judicial reforms we've been talking about. Was that as significant a moment as it felt like watching it from here in the States? What was your reaction to that move?

I was in the States when that happened, but I can tell you how important it was by telling you what happened to my son that night. I have a son who's in his mid-30s. He's a great kid. He's married with a kid and went on the way and he was a commando in the army for eight years. He's a lawyer. He clerked at the Supreme Court. He's now running a startup. I mean, he's a kid that's had a lot of really cool things happen in his life. The night that BB fired this man, whose name is Yoav Galant, there was a kind of a spontaneous eruption, mostly in Tel Aviv, but not only. There was a lot in Jerusalem also. People took to the streets and our son, who's got a kid, he's got a wife, he's got a baby. It's not like the kind of thing you just run out of the house without thinking about it. He grabbed his flag and everybody's got a flag with a pole now by their front door because that's what you use with the protests. He grabbed his flags and he went onto the streets. He was out on the streets like three o'clock in the morning and then he texted us. He texted my wife and me when we were in the States and he said, they're not here till three o'clock in the morning, an unbelievable night, going home to shower and get a couple of hours of sleep before I go to work. And then he said, the most powerful moment of my entire life. That includes getting married, being a commando, clerking at the Supreme Court. I mean, he's had a lot of powerful moments. And I think what he felt was that crossed all the lines. And I don't care that it's two o'clock in the morning and that I have a kid and I have a job and I can't be bleary eyed in the morning. I'm out there and hundreds of thousands of people came out. And I

think that BB made a critical mistake shortly after that. Israeli polls showed that the most trusted minister in the government was Yov Galant, the man that BB had fired. And I think it's safe to say that six months ago, very few Israelis knew who Yov Galant was. He got very famous by being fired. And now of course he's in the news because we're in a little war with Gaza and he's a defense minister. So he's very much in the news today. But BB made a tactical mistake. And in that way, this is BB not at the top of his game. This is just BB not controlling those three people he appointed the way he assured you and Israel. He was going to be able to control them. This is BB making a kind of a really freshman error in firing Galant the way that he did. He's in a very bad spot politically right now. What was Netanyahu's reaction to the pressure of these protests, especially after Galant's firing? I think he was stunned. I think he has been really stunned by the response in general. Look, there's a kind of a view in the more religious, more right-wing part of Israel, which looks down at the secular Tel Aviv, what they would call privileged, I guess, in America, the high tech people, the pilots, the surgeons, the academics. The view of the right has long been these people. Yeah, it's true. They founded the country 75 years ago. But three generations later or two generations later, really what they want to do is code, go public, and have exits. And they want to go to work in Tel Aviv. And no, that's what they say. And they want to drive their Audi home and go to their house in Ramat Aviv, Gimel, and then go to the gigantic mall in Ramat Aviv. And they just don't really care about Israel that much anymore. They don't really care about Zionism that much anymore. Their grandparents' ideology died on the vine for a whole array of reasons. These people would say largely because it wasn't rooted in religion, but that's a whole other conversation. And I think what they said to themselves, yeah, they're going to get annoyed. And they're going to belly ache for a week or two. And it's going to go away. And I think BB was completely taken aback by not only being the left and then the center, but many people only could saying, no, this is too much. This is too far. So he misjudged the country in that regard. And I think he was very taken aback. He in the end, of course, pulled back on the firing of Galant. He ended up not following through on it. And Galant still is defense minister and now a very active defense minister because we're at war with Gaza today. So he's just, um, he's constantly playing catch up these days. Right. And then Netanyahu decides to kind of like put a pause on this proposed judicial reform, right? Which is ending how long? Oh, the pause is basically over, except for the fact that we're at war. And so he just can't do it right now. But the minister of justice, Yarev Levin, and the chairman of the Knesset's committee on constitution law and justice, who's Simcha Rothman, those are the two guys really pushing this. They said, when we get back from recess, we're pushing this thing through. But BB understood that if he pushed it through, the country would be stopped. In other words, the teachers unions would not teach. The doctors would not show up at work. The hospitals would be struck, except for the most extreme cases. The public transportation wouldn't run. People would block the highways. Israel would tank in international currency markets. He understood that he's between a rock and a hard place. If he doesn't push the reform through, he may lose his coalition. If he does push the reform through, he may actually lose the country that he's been so instrumental in building for so many years, which is partly what makes this a really a Greek tragedy. I mean, part of the reason that Israel is such an extraordinary place these days is due to Bibi Netanyahu. And I say that as somebody, by the way, who never, ever voted for him. But the economy that we have is largely due to his privatization efforts a couple of decades ago. The fact that we are regarded in certain parts

of the world as highly as we are is because he's malifluous. He's articulate. He's very smart. He's well read. He, until recently, really deserved, even if one disagreed with a lot of his policies and thought that maybe he was corrupt, about which I have no particular position. I just don't know. But he deserved a kind of a legacy of a person who was one of those prime ministers who really put Israel on the map. And what's in a Greek kind of a way so tragic is that no matter what happens now, he's going to be remembered as the prime minister who brought Israel to the brink of civil war at best. At worst, it's not the brink. If he tries to push this through, which I don't think he will do, but if he tries to push this through, there will be violence. There's absolutely no question in my mind what, what form it takes. I don't know. It could come from the right. It could come from the left, but it will not remain bloodless. I think he knows that on a certain level. But the last time Israel was this divided, we buried Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. This is very, very, very dangerous stuff. And he is really got no good options. Yitzhak Rabin, of course, killed by an extremist Jew who was incensed about the idea of a peace process, shot him at a peace rally in Tel Aviv. Danny, you mentioned in your new book that Israel was created with this idea of unity, unity of the Jewish people, unity of Am Yisrael. It was the idea that Jews from all over the world, regardless of political affiliations, regardless of ethnicity, of religious practice, united together to create the state. And since its creation, Israel has been fighting for its basic survival, right, for its place in the world. And for the last 75 years, it seems that its enemies were all external, the Palestinians, the Arab nations surrounding it, the European countries who continuously condemn it, the United Nations. But as Mati Friedman recently explained in an article he wrote for us at the Free Press, for the first time in Israel's history, it seems like the current government's enmity is aimed primarily at other Israelis. When you think about existential threats facing Israel, usually in the past decade or so, when people would talk about that, they'd be talking about Iran going nuclear as being an existential threat. How highly do you rate the threat of a possible civil war? Or how highly do you rate the threat of what is happening internally to Israel and where it could go? If you had asked me that question two months ago, I would have said to you, I'm despondent. I literally, I mean, I'm not alone in this, but I was really heartbroken. It was all consuming. Tons of our students at Shalem College were just not sleeping. People were walking around like zombies. Here was this country that had stuck together through thick and thin. Of course, we have a very raucous political system, and of course, we've always been divided between secular and religious and immigrants and natives and socialists and communists. Of course, we've had a very kind of a tumultuous internal past, but fundamentally in terms of commitment to the survival of the state as a Jewish democracy, that's just never been a serious question. And all of a sudden, here it was, we were ripping ourselves apart. Iran didn't even need to go nuclear for us to destroy the country. That was what was so devastating. And it said to me two months ago, how much am I worried about civil war and how highly do I rank the danger? I would have said, I'm scared to death. I'm scared to death. And if my kids were to say to me, we're getting on a plane and we're getting out of here, I would have been heartbroken, but I wouldn't have had anything that I really could say to them to argue against it. We're having this conversation in 2023, which means that for about eight years now, a lot of people in America have had that same glazed-eyed zombie-like look, right? For eight years now, we've been told that American democracy

is about to end, that it's on the ballot, that so-and-so will threaten American democracy, that if Trump wins, it will be the end of the nation. I remember waking up the morning that Hillary lost crying, truly believing that something fundamental had shattered and would never be fixed again. But you know what? It wasn't the end at all, like the institutions did hold. And I feel a little bit foolish now when I think back to the hysteria I felt. Why is this different? Because I think a lot of Americans and I think a lot of American Jews are looking objectively at the politicians and they say, well, these guys suck, but we have Marjorie Taylor Greene or we have Matt Gaetz. And then they look at the judicial reforms and they look at what's the norm in Israel versus other Western nations and they say, yeah, a few of these go too far over the line. But in the main, it seems like judicial reform is overdue and that seemed like a consensus position. So like, are you guys not sort of melting down, and I say that without judgment, I was a melter downer, in the way that we did? What do you think makes this substantively fundamentally different than the American version of what feels like a very similar conversation? I think the American situation we've shown, by the way, what saved America was the judiciary in large measure. I mean, in states where Trump said, find me the votes, it was the judiciary that said, that's not how the system works. He's been held accountable in all sorts of ways by the judiciary. I think the American judiciary has acquitted itself quite admirably in the time since this all became an issue. And that's to America's great credit, which only proves the importance of an independent judiciary. But what I think we've learned in Israel over the last two months, this has been going on now for about 18, 19 weeks. But what we've learned over the last two months or two and a half months is that just like in America, the judiciary proved very resilient. The love of country in this country has proven very resilient. And I am no longer worried that these judicial reforms are going to go through as long as we keep protesting and saying they can't go through. Obviously, if we let up the pressure and he does it, then that's a whole different story. But I think BB knows he can't push it through. And he's been actually telling people internationally now that it's not going to happen anywhere near the way that it was meant to be. So I think, unlike you in a certain way, we've gone through the same process, only our history is shorter. So we went through it in a shorter period of time. So you've been for, say, six years melting down and then coming back. So for us, it's been a matter of months. I feel unbelievably proud of what's happened in this country in the last 19 weeks to see how the left and the center have taken the flag back as their symbol to watch protests of religious and secular people together. Likud voters showing up to these protests with their Likud flags, not saying, you know, Likud flag in your face, but I'm a committed Likud voter. But on this one, I'm with you. Yes, there is room for judicial reform, but not this. I think one of the things that is so striking is the difference between sort of anti-government protests here in the States and anti-government protests in Israel, right? When I think about the protests of the summer of 2020, BLM, I can't remember seeing a single American flag. And the protests in Israel, I think, feel fundamentally different because even though they are anti this government, they're fundamentally patriotic. You've said that these protests represent an explosion of love for Israel. Yeah, I think that's exactly what's happened. There's been, I mean, if you add it all together, millions of protesters because if there's, you know, 200,000 every Saturday night, it's been going on for 18 weeks. It's a lot of people out there. So what do we see? Not a single instance of looting, not one. I mean, compare that to Portland and Seattle. At many of the protests, when you show up, they give you a bunch of roses. And what are you

supposed

to do with the flowers? You're supposed to walk up to the nearest policeman and hand her or him a rose, which is to say, you're just doing your job. And we get that. And we're not on opposite sides of this. You're here to protect us as much as you're here to stop us from doing things we shouldn't be doing. We're all in this together. And there's been very little, very, very little police violence. There's been actually two small instances in which nobody was seriously hurt. And that's what I mean. There's nobody here who's against anything, except now it's again, has turned into an anti government movement, which I'm less comfortable with. But it's just nobody here is angry at this country. Everybody here is everybody, by the way, the right and the left are or the pro reformers and the anti reformers are all moved by loving this country.

After the break, what Israel's founders would think of what's going on 75 years later? Stay with us. You just published a wonderful book called Impossible Takes Longer. And the subtitle of the book is a question 75 years after its creation, has Israel fulfilled its founders dreams? Before we get to that big question, I wanted to ask you this. What would Israel's founders make of what's going on right now? What would they make of these mass protests and of Netanyahu's choices?

I think, by the way, I mean, you know, Ben Gorion, who was the founding prime minister of Israel and the second longest serving prime minister that we've had, he was hardly a wallflower and he

was a ruffian in his own way. So part of him would actually, I think, understand some of the BBs up to. But I think he would say, you've crossed some lines here. And he would say, BB, look, you know what, I didn't like a lot of people in my government either. And I didn't like a lot of people in the country either. But I knew how I had to appear for John F. Kennedy. And I knew how I had to appear when I went to London. And I knew how I had to appear when I went to Paris. And there were just certain things you can't do. And at the same time, I think Ben Gorion and many of the others would say, wow, look at this, like 75 years later, this part of Israeli society that everybody thought, man, has that revolutionary spark died down? Man, have they kind of just moved way beyond the revolutionary spirit? They just want to make money. They just want to be comfortable. They just want to raise their kids. And by the way, nothing wrong with that. I mean, that's true of large swaths of America. Also, how many Americans are thinking about the Federalist papers all day long? You know, probably six. You know, it's okay not to have this revolutionary spirit be so prominent in your world to you all the time. But I think that the founders from 75 years ago would look and say, wow, look at that. These people still really care about this place. I think they would be thrilled. It's incomprehensible how far Israel has come in 75 years. I mean, Ben Gorion would look at the skyline of Tel Aviv and say, where's that? I mean, it was sand in 1906. You know, when Ben Gorion was prime minister, there was food rationing. And Israel is such a foodie country now. When Ben Gorion was prime minister, there was no money. They had to put up people in quonset huts. And now, you know, I mean, every other car seems to be a Tesla or an Audi or whatever. I'm obviously exaggerating, but the economy is chugging along very admirably. We're a high tech power. We're the fourth largest country in terms of NASDAQ registered companies. I mean, it's just unbelievable. So I think they would be amazingly proud of its accomplishments. But as what your question is specifically about now, I think they would be thrilled that two or three generations later, the sense of passion for the creation of a home for the Jewish people still resides so strongly in the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the people who are Ben Gorion's contemporaries. It's amazing to me when I think about how much

has been

accomplished in 75 years. And I want to go back to Israel's founding and to Israel's founding fathers, because like ours, they had conflicting visions of what they were doing when on May 14th, 1948, a little less than 40 of them gathered in the Tel Aviv Art Museum to declare the establishment of the state of Israel, right? These people are Israel's Benjamin Franklans.

These are Israel's George Washington's. These are Israel's John Adams. But to many of our listeners, I think the names David Ben Gorion or Golda Meir or Moshe Charrette won't be as familiar to their ears. Tell us about just a few of these people, maybe your favorites and how they arrived in that museum hall in what was then Palestine on that fateful day. They arrived through very different paths, but they shared one view. So Golda Meir came from Milwaukee. David Ben Gorion had grown up

in a very traditional orthodox home in Eastern Europe, had become secular and Zionist, but had a profound Jewish upbringing and knew a tremendous amount. Zev Jabotinsky, who was the father of revisionism, who was certainly not in the hall that day because Ben Gorion, first of all, he had died in 1940, but even his representatives were not in the hall that day because Ben Gorion saw them as anathema. But Jabotinsky did not have a very rich Jewish upbringing. And Theodore Herzl knew basically nothing about Judaism. But what do they all have in common? They had in common a sense that it's enough. It's enough for the Jews to live on borrowed time, knowing that eventually the invitation is going to run out. It's enough for the Jews who produced the Hebrew Bible and therefore the platform of Western civilization to not be in a place where they speak their own language. It's enough for the Jews to be attacked, especially in Eastern Europe, when the only thing that they can do in response is hope it doesn't happen again very soon. It's enough. No real people lives on borrowed time, constantly attacked, not speaking its own language, not admitted into the professions, even in the supposedly more modern and assimilating communities of Western Europe, like France and England and Germany and so on and so forth. They said, it's enough.

What kind of self-respecting people allows this to happen? We need what everybody else has. This was of course the period in human history when the nation-state is all the rage. They said, we want what they're having basically. They're all having nation-states. We want a nation-state.

What's amazing about it is how fast it happened. Theodore Herzl gathers 200 delegates together in a conference hall, a hall of theater kind of thing, in Basel in 1897. Now 30 years later, and you and I are both old enough to know that 30 is nothing. 30 years later, the British Empire in the Balfour Declaration in 1917, exactly 30 years, says, his government views with favor, the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people. In other words, from 200 delegates in Basel, 30 years, the largest, most powerful empire on planet earth endorses the idea. 30 years after that, which is 1947, the UN votes to create the state and a year later, those 37 people, just less than 40, as you quite correctly said, gather in the museum in Tel Aviv to declare independence. So they'd come from all different walks of life.

They'd come from rich. They'd come from poor. They'd come from west. They'd come from east. Some of them spoke German. Some of them spoke Russian. Some of them spoke Polish. Some of them spoke Yiddish. Some of them spoke English. Almost none of them, by the way, spoke Hebrew very well, which is ironic. But they came together to change the existential condition of the Jew. They came to form a new kind of a Jew. A lot of us think about Israel's history. We don't understand that it was really a rebellion against something as much as it was a rebellion for something. Just as, by the way, the American Revolution was a rebellion for a new kind of

human self-governance, but it was a rebellion against, in this particular case, a political reality with King George and so on and so forth. In the case of the Jews and Zionism, it wasn't a rebellion against a certain ruler. It was a rebellion against a condition of 1800 years of never being at peace, at never being at rest, of never knowing when they were going to kick you out. And so many places had. England kicked all its Jews out in 1290. Spain kicked all its Jews out in 1492. And I think we need to remember, by the way, what does it mean to get kicked out of Spain in 1492? It doesn't mean that you buy an Iberia Airlines ticket and fly to some other place, right? You take your family, whatever you can carry, and what percentage of you die on the way. And where are you headed? You don't have any idea where you're headed. You keep walking until they stop terrorizing you. And, you know, Jewish communities, they arrive wherever they get in tatters and destroyed, and they're theologies of collapse because they can no longer believe in a God that makes any sense. I mean, it's an unbelievable, destructive thing kicking people out. Two things are worth noting. Number one, I mean, Jabotinsky and many others all said to the people that were still in Europe, get out, get out now. It was the 1920s, 1910s, 1920s, get out. This has to end badly. Now, in the early 20s, nobody'd heard of Adolf Hitler.

What did Jabotinsky and the revisionists see that others were blind to?

They saw a fundamental hatred of the Jew that was part of the DNA of Christian Europe. That's just, you don't have to just say it. That's what they thought. And what Bialik, who was this, you know, seemingly loving poet, said to American Jews, by the way, he said,

I know you think you have it really good right now in America because America is welcoming millions of refugees small over the world. Mark my words, said Bialik. These were his words. One day, American Jews will be drinking out of the same trough that we're drinking out of now. In other words, this hatred will cross the Atlantic and it will get to you too.

Has that begun to happen? I don't know. But Bialik would be watching with a terrible sense of, wow, I wish I was wrong and now I'm not so sure I was wrong.

There was a debate, Danny, among the early Zionists, going back to the 1800s about where the Jewish homeland should be. Should it be Uganda? Some proposed Galveston, Texas. Someone proposed Japan.

Like, was there actually any traction to these ideas and why did it have to be Israel?

There were a few suggestions. But the main one that got traction was what's called the Uganda plan. It was actually in what's called Sudan today. It was called the Uganda plan because it was in what the British called the Uganda protectorate. But it included modern-day Sudan. And the reason that came to be in about 1903 was that the British said, you know, this Palestine place is very highly contested. The Ottomans are there now and the Arabs are there and the world is changing. And it's just, why don't you go somewhere else? Now, Herzl, by the way, who was also desperate to find the Jewish homeland because he was also despondent about what he saw happening in Europe.

Herzl was animated fundamentally by his experience of antisemitism first in Vienna and kind of reconfirmed by the Dreyfus affair in Paris. But that was not what sparked it.

He was already a long-committed Zionist by that point. But Herzl and others said, oh, my God, we got to find a home. And the British said, how about Uganda, the Sudan plan? The Uganda plan

Sudan? There's nobody there, which of course was not true. But how about that? And Herzl proposes

it

to the Zionist World Zionist Congress in 1903 and it blows the Congress to smithereens. Now, why did Herzl think it was an okay thing to do? Ironically, because he didn't know enough about Judaism. If you knew more about Judaism, you would understand that this was not about, we've been praying three times a day facing Jerusalem wherever we were and asking God, bring us back from the four corners of the earth to that land. Not give us a sovereign

state someplace, but bring us back home. The problem with the Uganda plan was that it would have never been home in that way. And Jews would not have been moved to tears by having their feet

touch the ground. When my grandfather, my mom's dad, has gone a long time already, but when he moved to Israel in 1959, and every time he would land, he would get on his knees and then his hands and he would kiss the ground. He was not going to kiss the ground of Sudan. That was not going to happen. Palestine wasn't really Palestine. Palestine was in the eyes of the Jews, the land of Israel. And we were not looking for a place to go. We were looking to go home. They saw us not as creating a Jewish state, but as recreating a Jewish state. And in some way, we're reading the book of Kings 3 or 4. In other words, we're continuing the story of the Bible. And that's why no other place really could have worked. No other place would have evoked that passion.

Denny, what those 37 Jews decided to do that day in Tel Aviv by declaring the establishment of a Jewish state would not have been possible were it not for what happened six months before at the UN on November 29th, 1947. Here's what you write in your book about that day.

Because we know the outcome of the vote, it's virtually impossible to recapture the tension in the room at that time. The vote would take a mere three minutes,

but at stake, was it nothing less than the future of the Jewish people? Say more about that, if you would. Explain that tension and explain those stakes to us. Well, in 1947, you're a little bit more than two years since Auschwitz stops spewing Jews into the sky. You're a little bit more than two years after the period in which the world was, for all intents and purposes, divided into two groups, the people who slaughtered the Jews and the people who let the Jews be slaughtered.

Let's just call it like it is. The United States closed its borders to the Jews who had nowhere else to go. Canada closed its borders to the Jews who had nowhere else to go. Great Britain closed the borders of Palestine to Jews who had nowhere else to go. The world was entirely complicit. And so in 1947, I mean, literally, you felt as if the smoke was still in the air.

In 1947, the Jewish people is still recoiling from the greatest tragedy to have befallen at least in 2000 years and maybe ever. And all of a sudden, for a very brief window, I mean, really brief window, the world feels, yeah, they've got to have a place to go. Now, Zionism, it's very important to state, was well underway long before the Holocaust. We said already that the British had endorsed it in the Balfour Declaration in 1917. That's before World War I is over. So I mean, it's long before the Holocaust. But in the eyes of the world, it was the Holocaust that I think brought down asencia. This people just always is on the receiving end of the brunt of history. They need a place to call their own. It was a very short window, Barry, because by the time the War of Independence breaks out a couple months later in the early 1948, we now know that the State Department was already trying to bring the vote back to the General Assembly of the UN for a revote. In other words, they knew that it would never pass a second time. So I mean, we're talking about a very small window. I know why was there

attention there because it had a pass by two thirds and the Zionist delegation at the UN did not have the votes. And through a whole array of reasons that we won't go into now, they were able to delay the vote into the Thanksgiving weekend. And everybody else went home to have, you know, turkey and cranberries and whatever else. They toiled day and night, trying to figure out which delegations they could possibly convince to vote in favor. But it wasn't clear who had said, Yeah, okay, I'll vote for you. Don't worry. I got it. But we're going to change their minds when they got to the General Assembly with no repercussions whatsoever. And so 33 to 13 to 10 is barely your two thirds. And we still have the score sheet that the Zionist delegation kept on its own desk checking off who had voted, which way they were busily counting as long before numbers on TV screens and all that kind of thing. It was a nail biter. And had it be vote been no, then the Jewish people would have been locked in a sense of we were just basically almost annihilated. And the world's fine with that. But because the vote passed by really a hair with the Jewish people had a sense that we were just nearly annihilated. And the world didn't care. But maybe now the world is giving us a new lease on life. And we're going to grab that new lease on life. And we're going to transform the Jewish people, the narrative of from destruction to rebirth, from catastrophe to renewal, that narrative which colors basically every Jew on planet Earth today. That's the narrative that emerges because of those three minutes that vote in the General Assembly in 47 and 75 years of building and creating that's transpired here ever since. That's what was at stake. Everything was at stake. You've said to me once this line that I'll never forget, which is that Israel makes life on the Upper West Side possible. In other words, we don't know a world without the security of the state of Israel. And so when anti-Semitism is rising here in the States, the question about what to do about it is fundamentally transformed in a way that would just be unthinkable to our ancestors 100 years ago. Danny, in Israel's Declaration of Independence, the founders are very clear. The purpose of Israel, they write in part, is so that the Jewish people can be masters of their own fate like all other nations in their own sovereign state. And they very explicitly connect it to the slaughter of Jews in the Shoah and the Holocaust. Here's in part what it says. The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people, the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by reestablishing in Eretz Israel in the land of Israel, the Jewish state, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comedy of nations. And it goes on. There's a debate that sort of has always gone on inside the Jewish world. And the debate is really Auschwitz or Sinai. In other words, is the reason for being of the Jewish state Auschwitz and the slaughter of two out of every three Jews in Europe under Hitler, or is the reason for being in the Jewish state Sinai and the fact of the Bible and God's sort of divine destiny for the Jewish people to live there, religious destiny. And I think both of those arguments sort of have profound implications. And I'm wondering if you can speak to that. Well, it's interesting that they both appear in the Declaration of Independence, but the very first paragraph of the Declaration says this is the land from which the Jews gave the world the Book of Books, which of course is the Bible, which of course is Sinai. So the truth is that the Declaration says yes and not either or. And that has been a debate obviously between secular and religious for a very long time. It's not Holocaust in the sense of that particular instance, but the need for a Jewish state because

you're never safe anywhere else versus the need for a Jewish state because there's a way that God wants us to live, said the religious world. And this was going to be an opportunity to create a place where we could do that. At the end of the day, what I think we've learned in Israel is that you will not make a go of it in this country as Israelis unless we weave into our narrative elements of both. The hyper secularism of the founders is largely gone. It's not entirely gone. And there are still families in Israel that really have this visceral anti religious sensibility about them. But even those people who have the visceral anti let's say liturgical sensibility or anti Jewish law sensibility, those are people who in universities are now seeking out opportunities to study Jewish texts. Those are people who are going to programs like Michi note or post army programs or post college programs saying, give me three months, put me on a mountain top. I want to study with interesting people who are like me and not like me with really

great teachers. What they're saying is I want to be part of the same conversation that began in that biblical world. I don't want to necessarily have anybody tell me what I can eat. And I don't want anybody telling me what I can wear. And I don't want anybody telling me I have to go to pray. But I do want to know what those texts say. And I want to be able to see myself as a continuation of that. That's by the way gets a lot more traction starting in 1973. 73 Israel's caught off guard is horribly battered in the first 10 days of the war and loses 3000 soldiers in the war of about three weeks, which for Israel is a huge number. And after 73 people said to themselves, you know what, we're never really going to be at peace here. And if I'm not going to be at peace here, then why am I staying? Well, I'm staying because of the Jewish people. Why does the Jewish people matter? Well, how am I going to make a claim about what the Jewish people, why the

Jewish people matters? If I can say nothing about what the Jewish people has had to say. And that's the beginning of the crack. You know, as Leonard Cohen said, there's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. I think that's exactly what this is. That's a crack. It's a break in the, it's part of the heartbrokenness of Israel is a crack in 73, which widens over time. But the light, that light starts to come in. And I think Israel is a fascinating combination of a profound historical sensibility, as well as a profound religious sensibility. And the richest parts of Israeli life, I think, are the ones that do not try to choose between them, but try to integrate between them. Danny, some fateful decisions were made 75 years ago in that museum, and sort of among that

group of people whose echoes are still ringing today, right? One of them. They didn't create a constitution, right? In your book, you say that the reason was that the founders didn't want to forecast the future. Instead, they wanted to create a democracy that could change and be ever evolving with its people in order to create a Jewish state that would last. Here's what the declaration says. It says that a constitution, quote, shall be adopted by the elected constituent assembly not later than the 1st of October, 1948. Well, here we are 75 years later. That never happened, which makes Israel one of a handful of liberal democracies in the world without one. Why didn't it happen? And what are the ramifications of that? Well, the ramifications are partly what we're going through right now. And the partly ramifications are that we have no central documented outlines what the powers of the judiciary really ought to be. Should there be judicial reform? Should there not be judicial reform? How should justices be selected and so on and so forth? We never really had our constitutional convention. And I think, by the way, we need

a constitutional convention more than we need a constitution. We need to have a national conversation about how we want to buttress and guarantee our democracy, even if it comes out in sporadic basic laws and not one unified constitution. Now, why did Israel say that about October 1st, 1944? It was ludicrous, of course, right? When the Declaration of Independence is signed in May, October is six months away, five months, five months away. There was no way they were going to write a constitution in five months. They were at war. I mean, come on, give me a break. They were at war for their very lives, who had the luxury of sitting around and deliberating, like, you know, in Philadelphia, which by the way, even the United States didn't do in 1776. Right, Danny. And just to be clear, after that day in May, May 14th, how many days later does war break out? War broke out on November 29th, 1947, the day that the UN voted, war broke out between Jews and Arabs inside Palestine, and on May 14th, that actual day or the next morning, actually, Arab armies attacked, five Arab armies attacked. One of them, Iraq, didn't even have a border with Israel, but joined in for the fun anyway. So who was going to actually write a constitution? You were trying very hard not to run out of money and ammunition, and one percentage of your civilian population was going to die in that war. I mean, think about that, United States, that would be 3.6 million people. And one percent is a lot of people. It means no family didn't know somebody who would die, and many families had two sons and lost them both. I mean, it was a war that took the guts out of the people here. A constitution was, the idea by Dr. October 1st was ludicrous. So why say it? Because Resolution 181 of the United Nations, which is called the Partition Plan, accepting that they voted on, which we've talked about on November 29th, 1947, said specifically there was going to be a Jewish state in the Arab state, both had to be democracies, and both had to pass constitutions. So if it was the founder's way of saying to the United Nations, we heard you, we're obviously going to be a democracy. We've been a democracy since for decades already. Everything had been democratic. There were constituent elected assemblies. There was labor unions that were democratically elected, and there was a whole democratic apparatus, which tragically is another story altogether, but tragically the Palestinians have not developed on their side of the line, or things in this region would look very different. But a constitution was less obvious. So they said it in the Declaration of Independence, we're going to do it, meaning like get off our back, don't worry, we heard you, we're going to get to it. Of course they never did. Now they did for two reasons, I think at least two major reasons. One of them was that Justice Israel is very divided now about what the role of religion should be in the country, what the role of the court should be in the country, and Ben-Gurion was afraid, as was Bacon, who came many years later, afraid that if they had that conversation, it was going to rip the country to shreds, so better to put it off. And that was the one reason. The other reason, ironically, is that Ben-Gurion actually said that he was worried that the judiciary would be too strong, and he wanted to make sure that he, as the first prime minister, could basically do what he needed to do to make the country happen. He did not want a judiciary second guessing him or nipping it as heels. Ironically, of course, the power of the judiciary is exactly what we're pulling ourselves apart over now. And I think what one might say fairly is that if in 1948 we believed that if we tried to write a constitution, we were going to pull ourselves apart and not survive, 75 years later, if we don't have the

conversation that would be the preamble to writing a constitution, we're going to pull ourselves apart. We may not emerge from this trauma of present-day Israel with a constitution, but we must emerge from it with a constitutional convention. But if 75 years ago we said, let's not have the conversation because we won't survive the conversation, I think now we know let's have the conversation because we won't survive not having the conversation.

So in addition to not having a constitution, Israel is also unique among democracies in that it doesn't actually have the word democracy in the Declaration of Independence. In fact, and I learned this in your book, Ben-Gurion deliberately crossed out that word from many drafts. Now, we don't entirely know why he made that decision, but we have some insights from a diary entry of his. And it says this, as for Western democracy, I'm for Jewish democracy. Western doesn't suffice. Being a Jew is not simply a biological fact, but also a matter of morals, ethics. The value of life and human freedom are for us more deeply embedded thanks to the biblical prophets. Remember, this is a secular person than Western democracy. It's an amazing passage. How do you understand that and what insight does it offer us into his thinking?

One of my most powerful memories as a kid is from either 68 or 69, when my parents took us to see Ben-Gurion's office in stable care in the Negev where he worked. And his desk was still there the way that he had left it. And I don't know why I remember this. He had a Bible on his desk, which was so falling apart that it was tied with a little string. There were no rubber bands, of course, back then, right? So, and if they were worried, it would have cracked by the time I saw it in the 60s. But he had it tied with a string. David Ben-Gurion, everybody says he was secular. What does that mean? It means he didn't keep Shabbat. He ate whatever he wanted to eat, but secular. He was as about as divorced from the Jewish tradition as the Pope is from the Catholic tradition. I mean, Ben-Gurion was so deeply immersed in a love of the Bible and Jewish history. And again, creating a state was just to write the next book of the Bible. And so, what I think he was saying in part was, we had these ideas before John Locke and Thomas Jefferson. This idea of taking care of the widow, the orphan, the poor, the stranger, protecting minorities. Now, obviously, democracy doesn't exist in the Bible. But the idea of democracy, which is people have a voice, people have rights, people have things coming to them. I think what Ben-Gurion felt partly was, you know, John Locke didn't come up with this, Rousseau didn't come up with this.

You know, we did. And so, there is a possibility, by the way, that Ben-Gurion was nervous about something else, which is that he knew, because the war had started as a civil war between the Jews and the Arabs of Palestine, those Arabs, of course, are now today's Israeli citizens. So, Israeli Arabs are not Palestinians. They're Israeli Arabs who make up 20% of our country. Ben-Gurion

understood that that was going to be a very tough road to hoe. What to do with these people? I mean,

on one hand, they were going to obviously be citizens, and therefore, they would have every right that any Jewish Israeli had. But they had just been at war with the country. I mean, you can't completely ignore that. What Israel did, perhaps as a grave mistake, and perhaps because there was no alternative, is it put Israeli Arabs, starting in 1948, under a military administration until 1966. So that, for example, if I went to a little store and shoplifted a packet of gum, I would go before a local court. If an Arab kid shoplifted a pack of gum, he or she would go before a military court. If you were an Israeli Arab back in the 50s and you wanted to go from one town to another, you needed the approval of the military to go from your town to another town, etc. They

lived under a military administration. It sounds horrifying retrospect, and it really was horrifying, and I think it was a mistake. But one can understand why the mistake was made, given how the war started. I think that part of what Ben Gurion was worried about was if he put the word democracy in the declaration, the world would come in and say, what the hell are you talking about? I mean, you cannot have a democracy, which you've just pledged yourself to, and have these people under military administration. That's my theory. I have actually never heard anybody else say that, so I guess in large measure, it's probably wrong. But I think he knew that there was going to be a problem

with Israeli Arabs and how to handle them. And I think taking out the word democracy may have given him some more wiggle room, but it was mostly out of a love of his deep belief that the foundation

of Western civilization was the Hebrew Bible. The Jews had given the world the civilization that had created the West, along with the Greeks and many others, of course, but we had been one of those founding pillars. And I think in the founding document of the Jewish state, he wanted to kind of reclaim our central place in Western civilization.

To what extent, Danny, do the current protests represent the tension that has existed since Ben-Gurion's diary entries, since the founding of the state? The tension between is this a Jewish state fundamentally inspired by the Bible that believes itself to be writing the third book of Kings, as you put it before? Or is this the thing that Ben-Gurion rejected, a Western democracy in the East, sort of a liberal democracy in a sea of undemocratic regimes? There is a fundamental tension that lies at the heart of Israel's identity that I think is exploding into view right now. And by the way, it's not just the tension between sort of Jewishly inspired state versus democracy. It's also internal to each of those categories. What does it mean to be a Jewish state? Does that mean to be a theocracy or does that mean to be a state that protects the Jewish people? What does it mean to be a democracy? Does it mean to protect liberal democratic norms, as you've been beautifully articulating in this conversation? Or does democracy mean to represent the will of the people? Talk to me a little bit about how you understand those tensions. I think tensions are healthy, first of all. And what I love about the protests is you can go and see signs that have the big word, demokratia, which obviously means democracy, but it's written in the font of a Torah scroll. That's the great thing about this country. I mean, this country is a liberal democracy, and yet it is completely explicit about it's the primacy of the Jews in this liberal democracy, right? If the United States, let's say 50 years from now, United States is mostly Asian or Hispanic or whatever, it doesn't make any difference. And therefore, Congress reflects that demographic reality. And the president is Asian or Hispanic. Is that a failure or a success of American democracy? You know what I would say, of course, this is an obvious success of American democracy. And it doesn't matter whether they're white or black or this or that, this country is about the self-governance of people that want to be part of this American dream. If in 50 years Israel is mostly Arab, and therefore the Knesset is mostly Arab, and the Prime Minister therefore is Arab, is that a success or a failure of Israel's democracy? That's more complicated. It's a success of the apparatus of Israel's democracy. But it's a failure of the vision behind the creation of the country. And that way Israel is not a Hebrew-speaking, falafel-eating version of the United States. It is not a liberal democracy which should give no primacy to any ethnic group or any religion or any whatever. We are giving primacy. And our

challenge is this really, really deep challenge between how do you act like a liberal democracy almost all the time and yet give primacy to one people's history, one people's pain, one people's holidays, not to the exclusion of the others, but it's primacy. Barry, look, I think that, you know, some of the things about living in this country, the tensions are the most productive. As parents, we had to raise our kids to be willing to go to the army and to do whatever it would take that they were commanded to do within moral constraints, obviously, to defend this country, but not hate Arabs. That's a tension. And I think, by the way, part of the reason for the rise of Israel's radical right is that you need a certain kind of education and nuance and worldliness to be able to balance that. And the more that Israelis are educated inside Israel, the more that Israelis are raised that they can't even remember when there wasn't a conflict and there wasn't an occupation, when there wasn't a this, there wasn't a that, time is running out on that sensibility. But I don't believe that these tensions are fundamentally problematic. I think they're rich. So when I go to the protests and I see a sign that says democracy in a Torah scroll font, I say, there we go. When I hear a rabbi speak from the platform and talk about how important democracy is and how Judaism cannot flourish as it's meant to flourish in a society in which all people do not have a voice, in which all people have their rights protected. When I hear rabbis talk that way, I say, oh, wow, okay, that's the part of Israel. We need to actually put into the Petrie this and clone and clone and clone and clone as much as we possibly can. And part of our challenge after this period of unrest, which I hope and pray we're going to get through, okay, is going to be to ask ourselves as a society, how do we allow that very nuanced, humanist, profoundly religious form of Jewish life to flourish and to try to take some of the oxygen out of the room and slow its growth down? We have to have that conversation. One of the things I grew up learning, Danny, is that the UN partition plan granted Israel 56% of the real estate and the Palestinians with a little less, 43%. But the Israelis accepted partition and the Palestinians rejected it. And as we've discussed in this podcast, a day after the signing of the declaration, war breaks out, 20,000 people die. And this is just the beginning. We have the Six Day War, we have the Om Kippur War, we have the First Lebanon War, the Second Lebanon War, the Intifadas, terrorism, the 100 rockets from Gaza that have rained out on Tel Aviv today. In a sense, since 1948, Israel has been in a state of constant war. And this book that you've just written, the question that the subtitle asks us is, has Israel fulfilled its founders' dreams? And it seems to me that the idea of being at constant war would have been a nightmare to them. Would they have been surprised at the state of affairs with regard to Israel and its external neighbors? I don't think so. I think Vladimir Jabotinsky, who wrote the iron wall, said explicitly, we have to be prepared for this to last for a very, very long time, only when they hit an iron wall and understand eventually that we're never going to be dislodged, are they going to make peace with us? By the way, that's what's happening, right? I mean, Egypt realized after 73 that even though it had almost won the war, it didn't win the war, and we were not going to be dislodged. So it signed the peace treaty with us beginning in 77, and then finally in 79. Jordan in 94, the Abraham Accords, Morocco, Sudan, there's rumors about Saudi Arabia, we shall see. The one people that is still at war with us really, except for Iran, which is its own crazy story, is the Palestinians, what you mentioned all the rockets that were showering down on Israel today, Barry. What was today? You know what today was? Today was the

latest battle in the War of Independence, because it's the same war about whether or not we have a right to be. As soon as that war ends, everybody here lives better. So I don't think the founders would have been surprised. I think they would have been saddened, and I'm saddened. I'm saddened about what happens to the people on the other side. I'm saddened what it takes from our kids. Some said it when it does to our society, but I don't think they would have been surprised. When you take a step back from the daily headlines and you look at the big picture story of Israel, the most despised people in human history, almost wiped off of the map by Hitler, returning to their ancient homeland, resurrecting a dead language, resurrecting, frankly, a near dead people, objectively, it is like a miracle. It's an unbelievable story. And yet this little country, the size of New Jersey, one of the most despised countries in the world. It's a huge question, but it's one that I really wanted to ask you as I was reading this book. Why? Why is Israel so hated and demonized? Well, it's one of the most despised countries in the world. It's also one of the most loved countries in the world, which is kind of amazing about it. There's people that despise it for no reason. There's people that adore it for no reason or for theological reasons that are not political, etc. I guess I would, in a very Jewish way, answer your question with a question. I mean, why do people in Charlottesville start chanting, Jews will not replace us? I mean, where in the world does that come from? What did the Jews do in the United States to prompt people saying Jews will not replace us? This is the perennial question of Jewish life. There are people that would argue that it's deeply rooted in Christian theology. I don't know. I mean, there's certain arguments there that I find convincing, many others that I don't, because you had anti-Jewish sentiment before Christianity. You have anti-Jewish sentiment in Japan, which is not Christian based, obviously. It's one of the conundrum of the Jewish people that we are on the receiving end of this all the time. And I think what the Jewish state idea was, we may still be on the receiving end of it, but let's be on the receiving end of it in a place where we can defend ourselves, where we'll chart our own history. I saw the pictures today on the news of, you know, families cowering behind cars. Like, I thought to myself, really? Like 75 years later, he's left a crouch in the middle. That's what we were doing in Europe. The difference is that when it happened to you in Europe, you went home, you nursed your wounds, and you prayed to God that it didn't happen again. And here you go home, you nurse your wounds, and you hit back to make sure that they don't do it right away. And that's the ultimate existential change. It's horrifying for us, and it's horrifying for them. But the question of the hatred of the Jew is at the root of the question of the hatred of Israel. Why does the world hate Israel, especially when the world understood in 1947 why it needed to create a Jewish state? For the same reason that they chanted, Jews will not replace us in Charlottesville. When I understand that, I'll understand the other. After the break, what does Israel's future hold? How does Danny think of Israel at 80, 90, or 100? Stay with us. Danny, let's talk for a minute about what practically lies ahead for Israel. Netanyahu, as we discussed, reinstated the Minister of Defense. The reform has been paused. The Knesset has been on break until late last month. So as the Knesset returns and the pause on reforms has lifted, what do you see unfolding in the next few months? What does Israel's 75th year look like from your perspective? One would have to be very foolish to try to predict events in

Israel. There are just too many variables to solve for X. But I think the smart money is on the reform not going through in any way near what it looked like when it was first proposed. I think the smart money is that Netanyahu will try to get some minimal reform through. First of all, because as we said before, there is room for judicial reform in Israel. There's no question about that. And also because he's going to try to keep his right flank somewhat modified, whether the massive protests will now allow him to get anything through, I don't know. Whether the government can hold, I don't know. If the right wing breaks away from Netanyahu, will Gantz, who's now polling to win, would he say, okay, let's go for elections. I'm going to be prime minister? Or would he say, you know what, we don't need elections now. We need stability. And

Bibi, I'm bringing my flank to you. We're going to have a national new government. You can stay prime minister. You don't have to rotate with me. The best case scenario is there's some kind of somewhat tumultuous but not overly tumultuous legislative slash governmental process by which this gradually gets taken off the table. The right either stays with Bibi or doesn't stay with Bibi, in which case we have to either have elections or not have elections, but we sort of move ahead. The alternative scenario is that Bibi tries to pull it off the table or almost all off the table, and both sides become enraged. The right becomes enraged because it's not getting what it believes it was elected to do. And the center and the left become enraged because there's some vestiges of the reform that are still getting put through. And the whole thing blows and there's violence. Oh, when the United States was 75 years old, it was gearing up for a civil war. I hope and pray that is not the case here. It would be horrifying. So I don't know what the 75th year is going to look like, Barry, but here's what I think. I think the 80th year, the 80th year is going to be good. I think the 80th year will have put this to bed. The 80th year will be a country at peace within itself. I hope and pray the 80th year will have arrived at some greater consensus nationally about how we are going to govern ourselves and how we're going to make space for all the various kinds of Jewishness that make up this country, how we get from here to there. I don't exactly know. I think it's fraught with real danger, but I hope and I pray that more moderate minds will hold sway. Well, one of the things that sort of strangely gone unsaid in this amazing conversation is the question of demographics. When you think about who the founders were in that hall that day in May and in 1948, these were largely Jews of Eastern European descent. They were Ashkenazi Jews. They had a particular worldview. They had a particular idea of the way things were supposed to go. They were the elite. And to some extent, those people, their grandchildren, their great grandchildren, they remained the elite. I think a huge part of what's happening in this protest movement, yes, it's about BB, yes, it's about traditional reform, but it's also fundamentally and existentially. I think about the unsettling feeling that many people have about the demographic change. What does it mean from Israel to go from a majority Ashkenazi country to a country that is where the prevailing winds are at the backs of Mizrahi Jews, of Jews from Arab countries, of Jews from North Africa who have very different understanding of what a nation state is supposed to be about. How much of Israel's next 25 years, next 50 years, are going to be determined by that battle? A lot is going to be determined by that, but it doesn't have to be a battle. In other words, part of the question is how much sway are they going to have? But then another question is, how are we going to educate people to help shape what they believe a nation state should be? Look, it's not surprising that Ben Gurion and his fellow founders saw the Mizrahi world as marginal, because, by the way, in 1935, when there were 17 million Jews in the world,

parenthetically, I would point out that we have not yet gotten back to that number since the Holocaust, but in 1935, when there were 17 million Jews in the world, one million of them were Mizrahi. What is that, 6%? Something like that. They really were marginal, and the people who founded the country really were European. But over the course of time, because most Ashkenazi Jews lived in countries where you could stay as a Jew and live a decent life, they didn't come to Israel. And because most Mizrahi Jews lived in countries where you could not stay and live a decent life, they left or fled or pushed out or whatever and came to Israel. And because of that, and because of slight discrepancies in birth rate and all of that kind of thing, now Mizrahi Jews are the majority of Israel's Jews. Not a huge majority, but they are more than half of Israel's Jews. Some people today, Barry, and I've actually been very much where you are, I've been actually writing about and saying about that this is really not about judicial reform. Fundamentally, it's fundamentally about this Mizrahi Ashkenazi divide. Of late, in the last couple of weeks, especially, I've heard leading Israelis like Shmuel Rosner, who's a leading Israeli journalist, like Giddy Greenstein, who's in his leading Israeli policy person, say, you know what, that's just not true. The Mizrachim have made so much progress in Israel. They don't really feel like second-class citizens. There's actually really certain interest groups that wanted reform for their specific reasons. The Charedim, the ultra-Orthodox wanted the reform because they wanted to pass one law, the one law that would guarantee that their sons would not have to go to the army. The Smotrich and Ben-Gvir group wanted to defang judiciary because the Supreme Court does not allow the construction of Israeli settlements on privately owned Palestinian land, and they want that changed because they're very sort of ambitious about the settlement project, so they have their specific agenda. Bibi wants the judiciary defanged because he's worried about his own political woes, his legal woes, and that's when you get these people together, they have a kind of a shared interest in judicial reform. They're pitching it to the people as a Ashkenazi divide, and that's what's getting so many Mizrachim to come to the counter-counter protests. In other words, they're protesting in favor of the reform, but these people say to me, but at the end of the day, what do the Mizrachim really care about judicial reform? What are they trying to say? The Supreme Court is what's been protecting their rights as an underclass, and the Supreme Court is what's gotten them to the place that they've gotten. They're not a dog in that race. They're being used ironically by the government, which is all Ashkenazi. Levin is Ashkenazi, and Smartridge is Ashkenazi, and Avima is Ashkenazi. They're saying that that's a bunch of malarkey. I don't know how much I believe that, but I think it's more complicated than I was willing to acknowledge earlier. Israeli Jews are changing. American Christians are not what American Christians were two generations ago. The American body politic looks very different than the American body politic did three generations ago, four generations ago. It's unrecognizable in some ways. Our job, I think, as Israelis, as educators, as religious leaders, as people who are makers of culture, is to remind Israelis of all different sorts that we came here for a purpose. We came

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here not to live at the whims of other people's senses of how history should unfold, and we have to figure out a way to do this together so we don't find ourselves back in that previous existence as a result of our own mistakes. And I think that this current crisis, as painful and as agonizing and frightening as it has been at times, is actually a very powerful wake-up call to Israelis that we have a lot to talk about, we have a lot to work on, and we may have gotten that wake-up call just in time.

Danny Gordes, thank you so much. Danny's new book is Impossible Takes Longer. It was a pleasure talking to you from Jerusalem. Barry, it's always a pleasure. Thanks so much. Thanks for listening. If you liked this conversation, if it provoked you, I imagine it did. If you disagreed with it, or if it led to a screaming match between you and your parents, that's great. That's what this show is all about. Share it with your family and friends, and use it to have an honest conversation of your own. And if you want to support honestly, there's just one way to do that. Go to thefp.com, T-H-E-F-P, like freepress.com, and become a subscriber today. We'll see you next time.

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