

## Introduction

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"What are we doing here?  
Why did we come here?"  
(Rami, an Israeli teenager,  
in a youth colloquium, Tel Aviv)

What are we doing here?

The answer to this question was crystal clear to the 14 young people, members of the BILU group (an acronym for the Hebrew phrase *Beit Ya'akov Lechu VeNelcha* – "House of Jacob come and let us go," *Isaiah* 2:5) when they descended, hearts pounding, on to the beach of Jaffa on the 19th of the Hebrew month of Tammuz 5642 (8th July 1882). The 13 young men and one young woman who had sailed from the Russian port of Odessa, were the trailblazers of an idealistic youth movement, dedicated to an almost impossible dream: to establish a Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

Their path was not easy. Critics and cynics called them "dreamers," "retarded" or even "insane," opining that there was no chance to realise their dreams in this forgotten land, in a dark and neglected corner of the Ottoman Empire. There was no chance for this delusion, the critics surmised, and they treated the young group with disdain and mockery.

No one could have believed that within 120 years, the Land of Israel would have become a Jewish state with nearly seven million citizens, six million of whom were Jews; that this state would have to its credit amazing achievements in science, culture, agriculture, sophisticated industry, and military strength; that it would have brought over exiles from the four corners of the earth and transformed them into one nation. In the course of the 20th century, great empires rose and fell; political ideologies swept over the globe, wars demolished the world order. Communism rose and collapsed, Nazism burst forth and was overcome, the Third World of newly-liberated states brought great hopes which too often melted away in bitter disappointment. But the biggest achievement of all, the most astounding in the annals of the preceding hundred years, was the establishment of the sovereign State of Israel.

What are we doing here?

Only a few decades ago, Jewish blood was freely shed in both the west and the east. Our Jewish brethren were slaughtered in horrible massacres, choked by poison gas, burnt in the crematoria of Auschwitz and Treblinka. The establishment of the State of Israel sent a clear message: Never Again! Nobody would be able once again to raise his hand against the Jewish people; should they do so – they would be hit hard in return. This applied not only to the Jews who had immigrated to Israel or had been born there, but equally to the entire Jewish people. Israel had given a whole people stature and had planted within their hearts the realization that now they had both a protector and a home.

What are we doing here?

Over the years, the collective memory of the Israeli nation became indistinct; the heroic struggles, the unforgettable characters, the extraordinary achievements – faded away into the shadows of the past. Truths that were once self-evident melted away or were challenged. Pseudo-historians, sceptics and scoffers twisted or dwarfed the awesome achievements that mark the State of Israel. Mistakes that Israel made along the way, mistakes that characteristically are alien to our religious, social and ethical principles, dimmed the light of our lives. The dream of a perfect society that acts according to the traditional commands of Judaism, is yet to be fully realised.

What are we doing here?

Many of us are not always aware of the deep, historical significance of the Return to Zion and our existence as a free people in a democratic Jewish state. Some of us are consumed by bitter self-criticism, which, even if sometimes deserved,

denies the unique achievements of Israeli society. There are those who choose the Jewish solution of yesteryear, and again take up the staff of the wanderer and depart across the seas in search of an easier life. Many of us forget either the reason or the goal of the renewed independence of Israel.

What are we doing here?

We have chosen to respond to this question not through our own voice, but through the voices of the dreamers, the men and women of action, the pioneers and the fighters, the ideologists and the spiritual leaders, the witnesses to both its successes and its failures. We have sought to gather together the major canonical texts from the past and from the present, which reflect the uniqueness and totality of the experience of Zionism and the State of Israel.

Moshe Dayan once said to me: "If you wish to understand the soul of a people – go to the poet." We went to poets and writers of prose, to lyricists, to painters and to caricaturists. We assembled here the most representative texts we could find which refer to the deep bond attaching us to Israel, without taint or hint of political bias. Beside expressions of patriotism we did not hesitate to present words of harsh criticism aimed at some of the negative phenomena in our lives, against which individuals, organisations and legal institutions constantly struggle. This too is patriotism; this too is democracy, this too is Zionism. When President De Gaulle was once asked why he lavished such respect on his bitter foe, the philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, he replied: "Sartre is also France." Israel's critics are likewise part of us.

In this book we have put together speeches and articles, poems and lyrics of popular songs, letters and military orders, extracts from diaries and excerpts from books and Supreme Court legal decisions, oaths of soldiers, verses from the Bible and the Talmud; all of these together with photographs and postcards, documents, newspaper articles and proclamations, stamps, paintings, caricatures and drawings of historical significance.

The book is constructed according to the Declaration of Independence of May, 1948. From its ringing phrases, we selected 12 sentences, which express the essential Israeli identity. Each sentence opens one of 12 chapters, in which we have gathered together extracts related to that topic.

I would like to express my appreciation to the people whose help was invaluable in helping me choose the material: Dr. Mordechai Na'or, a leading expert on the history of the Land of Israel; Yoram Teharlev, a distinguished songwriter and poet of Eretz Israel; Yossi Perlovitz, Yishai Cordova, and Arik Ben Shalom, of the Hotza'a Laor publishing house; editorial coordinator Nilly Ovnat, who expertly managed the massive day to day organizational work of the team - Noga Cohen and Limor Vidas. Yehuda and Danit Salomon designed the book with great flair. I was also helped by many of the country's leading authors and poets, whose advice was very important to me. My longtime colleague Asher Weill took responsibility for editing and supervising this English edition of the original Hebrew book.

The final responsibility for the choice and character of material is of course mine and mine alone.

Ultimately, this book is my response to the question "What are we doing here?" This is the land where we, the Israelis, became a free people again after two thousand years of exile.

Michael Bar-Zohar