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*Like Dreamers: A Book Review*

Israel as a contemporary nation is replete with crises. There are the obviously existential security issues: the large enemy population embedded in occupied territory at the country's center, the two overtly hostile neighbors on its northern border, the regional powers sworn to its destruction.<sup>1</sup> Its legitimacy is subject to constant evaluation on the international stage, with a considerable portion of foreign nations' domestic politics dedicated to the condemnation or endorsement of its right to exist. But despite the well-deserved urgency with which these issues are handled, it is apparent that external pressure is only so dangerous—just look as far as Iran's Mojtaba Khamenei, still in control of his country after a military campaign and heavy economic and political sanctioning.<sup>2</sup> It is thus that the most concerning challenges Israel faces come from within: in particular, the country of 10 million is increasingly confronting the possibility that its profoundly diverse polity may not have a shared vision for what the country should be.

The rifts in Israeli society can be understood through the lens of identity. In 2015, then-President Reuven Rivlin refreshed the conception of Israel's tribes by describing a “reality in which there is no longer a clear majority, nor clear minority groups... in which Israeli society is comprised of four population sectors, or, if you will, four principal ‘tribes’, essentially different from each other, and growing closer in size.”<sup>3</sup> These tribes are identified as the secular, the national religious, the Haredi, and the Arab. The delineations outlined by President Rivlin are similar to those developed elsewhere: the Oxford Handbook of Israeli Politics and Society identifies four cleavages—“the national one between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, the

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, Syria and Lebanon, and Iran, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio testified before Congress on June 2nd that the Supreme Leader of Iran is alive and “increasingly engaging” with negotiations after a long period of uncertainty as to where power was concentrated in the country and allegations that the IRGC had seized control.

<sup>3</sup> President Rivlin, *Israeli Hope*, 7 June 2015.

cultural one between secular and religious Jews, the socioeconomic (or class) one between rich and poor, and the ethnic one between Ashkenazi Jews and Mizrahi Jews.”<sup>4</sup> President Rivlin, however, manages a superior formula by acknowledging self-perception: the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi and rich-poor “diving lines unfortunately exist” but are subsumed within larger identities, while religious Jews are not monolithic but fiercely and meaningfully divided.<sup>5</sup> It is only between the four identified equally-sized groups where visions for the future of Israel truly have little overlap. Separate education systems, established through laws inherited from the Ottoman period, spread “totally different [outlooks] regarding the basic values and desired character of the State of Israel” within each camp.<sup>6</sup>

This furcation within the state is portrayed as a purely natural development. President Rivlin describes it as the consequence of “demographic processes that are restructuring... Israeli society.”<sup>7</sup> While Baruch Kimmerling’s *Ahusalim* might long for “the old and much loved Israel... of togetherness sitting around an imaginary Israeli camp-fire,” it was destined to disappear as religious families multiplied and secular immigration stagnated.<sup>8</sup> Yossi Klein Halevi would disagree.

For Halevi, a Jewish-Israeli intellectual born in the United States, the fissure of Israeli society is rooted not in demographic change but rather the Six Day War—or, more precisely, the political, military, and religious consequences of this nearly 60-years-past war. This argument is the focus of Halevi’s 2013 work *Like Dreamers*.

*Like Dreamers* purports to tell “the story of the Israeli paratroopers who reunited Jerusalem.” Its cover is emblazoned with “the symbol of [the Six Day War’s success for the Jewish people]... three paratroopers standing before the Wall and looking into the distance,

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<sup>4</sup> Ram, *Sociopolitical Cleavages in Israel*, pg. 1.

<sup>5</sup> President Rivlin, *Israeli Hope*, 7 June 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

humbled by awe.”<sup>9</sup> The image is immediately recognizable, among the most iconic in the country’s history alongside the 1948 war’s *Raising of the Ink Flag*. Yet the Six Day War is over in Halevi’s book by page 157. The entirety of the work comes in at just under 800 pages—and it’s the remaining 75% that is dedicated to arguing against a purely natalist explanation for Israel’s internal divisions and toward something more complex.

What exactly are Israel’s internal divisions? How do the desired futures of the four tribes differ? Halevi’s focus on the paratroopers of the 1967 war reveals that these characters, varied as they are, mirror the country—they begin their journeys broadly united and end the narrative in profound disagreement. They clash on the three great issues of national debate: Judaism, democracy, and security. These issues have far-reaching, and occasionally overlapping, consequences. Take, for example, security: Israel without the territories of the Six Day War was subject to a constant “unbearable intimacy between the home front and the battlefield.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, “the new borders required greater effort to protect,” a burden that continues to this day as Israelis such as Yoaz Hendel of the Reservists’ Party (and President Rivlin’s secular tribe) spend years away from home defending the long-running fronts in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even more seriously, the seemingly necessary expansion is known in the Arab world as a comparable defeat to the *Nakba* of 1948—the parallel disgrace of the *Naksa*. The centrist paratrooper Arik Achmon exclaims at the occupation of the West Bank at one point in *Like Dreamers*, “Generations to come will weep over what you are doing in the territories. You will make peace impossible.”<sup>12</sup> Israel’s immediate strategic needs could be perceived as coming at the cost of long-term peace, and thus composing a net negative for security overall. Furthermore, the emblematic security issue of the territories overlaps with the previously enumerated central flashpoints of Judaism and democracy. On the former, Halevi relays that

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<sup>9</sup> Halevi, *Like Dreamers*, pg. 164.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 215.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 441.

“when Jews in exile had prayed to be restored to the land of Israel, they’d meant Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron.”<sup>13</sup> All three were in Jordanian control prior to 1967.<sup>14</sup> For the religious Zionist (and Haredi, though they deserve special consideration in this regard) tribes of President Rivlin, there is an additional reason to possess land in the region beyond its potential military advantage—“Judaism required a sacred geography: concentric circles of divine emanation, from the unbearable intensity of the Holy of Holies, to the courtyards of the Temple, to the city of Jerusalem, to the land of Israel.”<sup>15</sup> The mediation of Israel between its status as a contemporary nation-state and a continuation of the biblical Kingdom of Israel means that for those who view the obligations of the Torah as binding, the borders can only be determined by divine will (which doesn’t perfectly align with modern geopolitics). To the latter issue of democracy, the consequences of expansion were apparent from the beginning: “[Prime Minister] Eshkol shared the fear... of ruling a million Palestinians, [due to] the threat to the demographic intactness of a Jewish state.”<sup>16</sup> Subsuming the Palestinians into President Rivlin’s Arab tribe would mean the death of the Jewish state by vote—it would lose, democratically, the meaningful characteristics that make it a unique home for an otherwise stateless people. Yet bringing them into the state devoid of rights would mean the end of democracy.<sup>17</sup> And the territories occupied by Israel during the Six Day War are just *one* issue, albeit with facets that touch the three principles of disagreement: like any other nation, there is a near infinite catalog of points of content which are similarly detailed. The Haredi may want a Halakhic state according to their tradition (but perhaps only when the Messiah arrives), the religious Zionist a Jewish state according to theirs,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pg. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Jerusalem was divided between Israel and Jordan, with the religiously-significant Old City falling on the other side of the border. The reunification of Jerusalem in the Six Day War was seen by many “as precursor of the imminence of the messianic era, ending the fragmentation of humanity itself” (Ibid., pg. 17).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pg. 272.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pg. 196.

<sup>17</sup> Democracy being a central—and in many ways surprising—tenant of Israel’s national character, especially for the secular tribe. As noted in Dowty’s *Democracy in Israel* (2021), “relatively few of the Jewish immigrants to Palestine or Israel, since the emergence of Zionism in the 1880s, came from countries with a viable democratic tradition.” The tension between territory, Judaism, and democracy in Israel has been called the “Israeli trilemma” by none other than friend of Stanford and renown Middle East scholar Tom Friedman.

the Arabs a Muslim state with the right of return, and the seculars a liberal democracy with rights for all (most contentiously women and sexual minorities)—but to navigate and understand the landscape the four of them compose, as President Rivlin so advocates, requires a deep understanding. *Like Dreamers* imparts this upon the reader through its thorough history and engaged storytelling.

The work's form as a book, and thus its ability to story-tell, play an important role in shaping its impact. Where an academic analysis might rely on dispassionate statical comparison or literature review, Halevi can tap into the reader's moral intuition and empathy with primary sources. In a quote that practically reaches out of the page, *Like Dreamers* asks: "what nation would turn its back on its ancestral heartland, won in a defensive war against attempted genocide?"<sup>18</sup> It's a national religious oversimplification—but in plucking it directly from the mind of Yisrael Harel, the hero of the IDF already depicted at that point for ten chapters and six years of story, even a committed peacenik begins to understand. Similar exasperation at the obvious correctness of mutually exclusive opinions can be found throughout *Like Dreamers*. Avital Geva describes the "sane Israel that wanted nothing more than to live, that knew that historical rights were not absolute and that only security needs, not biblical longings, could justify occupation."<sup>19</sup> Udi Adiv asserts confidently on behalf of the Arabs that "Israel is a colonialist state."<sup>20</sup> The function of this personification of political argument is to alleviate the tendency of the reader to gut-reject opinions that differ from their own. It is an uncomfortable, development sort of work: seeing the validity in both national religious and secular arguments echoes the wisdom of Rabbi Simcha Bunem, who carried around two quotes from the Jewish tradition on slips of paper (one which promised that the world was made just for him, and the other that he was nought but ash and dust) to remind himself that more can be true at the same time than one might anticipate. Such acculturation to difference represents the first step, taken

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pg. 251.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pg. 443.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pg. 277.

by both Halevi and the reader, toward building President Rivlin's envisioned "new Israeli order'... of partnership between the various population sectors in our society."<sup>21</sup>

The ultimate test of this book, of course, is in its impact—whether or not it is capable of advancing the state of affairs in Israel (and the region more broadly). In this manner I believe it to be a success. It has been widely critically acclaimed (it won the JBC's Jewish Book of the Year award, for example) which correlates with cultural impact, and manages to build bridges between otherwise uncommunicative groups as described above. Further, it leaps over other writing in its field by embracing the unique Middle Eastern atemporality best summarized in the William Faulkner quote repeated often in class: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." In engaging so thoroughly with the history of the region—not just that in the timeline of the book, but also history as relayed by the now-historical characters concurrently with their actions—Halevi provides a compelling image that introduces contemporary conflicts much earlier than is commonly understood as their genesis. In the internal monologue of paratroopers during the Six Day War's Battle for Jerusalem, *Like Dreamers* document the clash of a secular and messianic vision for the future of Israel as it is born: 48 years before Rivlin got on stage and announced the conflict to the public. The penultimate chapter concludes as two secular paratroopers—one influential in shifting Israel from socialism to capitalism and the other the founder of Peace Now—ideate the now-built West Bank security wall, claiming that they "have to save the state."<sup>22</sup> Beyond its compelling relocation of the origins of modern Israel's national debates, *Like Dreamers* also engages in these sorts of "complexifications." The security wall is referred to derisively as an "apartheid wall" by its detractors—that its origin came, at least in part, from an Israeli left frustrated by the failures of peace talks demands those who learn this afford the wall with a level of nuance they might not have otherwise. Halevi achieves this everywhere.

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<sup>21</sup> President Rivlin, *Israeli Hope*, 7 June 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Halevi, *Like Dreamers*, pg. 695.

It is important to note that Haredi and Arab voices are largely absent from the book. In this regard, the dynamic is flipped and it is President Rivlin who can explain Halevi's oversight, as he describes one of the great potential shifts in Israeli society in light of the equalization of the size of the tribes: "Are we willing to give up military service, as an entry ticket into Israeli society and economy, and settle for civilian or community service?"<sup>23</sup> *Like Dreamers* is a book about much greater issues than are on the cover. Yet, it engages with the crises of Israeli society through military history—a history that necessarily excludes two tribes, comprising "half of the future population of Israel."<sup>24</sup> Arabs do appear in Halevi's book: however, they are always portrayed in the abstract, as enemy armies and parties with which to negotiate for final settlement. The only named Arab character is Daoud Turki, a terrorist who contributes to Udi Adiv's radicalization and is ultimately imprisoned alongside him for treason against the Jewish state. Such a portrayal of the Arabs, a group that already comprises some 20% of the Israeli population, is remarkable, though perhaps not uncommon. In this instance it is not politically motivated, but represents a flaw in the medium—serving the unfortunate purpose of depriving exemplary individuals like Supreme Court Justice Khaled Kabub from a chance at the "complexification" Halevi offers other tribes. The Haredi, meanwhile, are even scarcer in *Like Dreamers*. They appear only once, alluded to in the style of Harry Potter's He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and even then derogatorily: "the black-hatted ghetto Jews darkening the land of the free Hebrews."<sup>25</sup> In this sense they are not only excluded, but derided: positioned as enemies not only of the Jewish state but its redemptive mission through their refusal to serve.

The historical absence of Haredim and Arabs from the military, and thus from *Like Dreamers*, has become one of the most contentious issues of the upcoming elections. 40% of the parties that currently comprise the government of Israel are associated with some form of Orthodox Judaism. Core to the majority of their political platforms is the preservation of an

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<sup>23</sup> President Rivlin, *Israeli Hope*, 7 June 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Halevi, *Like Dreamers*, pg. 577.

exemption from military services for the purpose of Jewish religious study: on numerous occasions, when the government has moved toward broadening conscription, critical factions within the government have threatened a vote of no confidence to avoid such a development.<sup>26</sup> This despite the IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir warning that the military could “collapse in on itself” due to manpower shortages across the unprecedented number of engagements it currently finds itself contending with.<sup>27</sup> As such, the opposition parties and other election hopefuls have made broadening military conscription central to their platforms. Yesh Atid and Bennet 2026, whom together make up the Beyachad mega-party projected to be among the top three parties in the next Knesset, both have universal conscription laws listed as their first policy objective on their websites. Yashar, another top election contender, has it listed at number three. Each references specifically that “those who don’t serve won’t get anything” from the state, an explicit condemnation of the status quo in which Haredim (and to a lesser extent Arabs) receive significant public funding without sharing the burden of military service. Religious communities have presented fierce resistance to attempts at leveling the conscription playing field. Most recently, a significant crowd of Haredim attacked the home of the Deputy Chief Justice of the Supreme Court while he and his family were sheltered inside. They destroyed windows, damaged his car, and caused havoc before being arrested by the police as they attempted to flee the scene.

Despite their absence from the text, Halevi’s *Like Dreamers* contains the seeds of prophecy for the reactionary violence of the Haredi community surrounding the upcoming election. The Deputy Chief Justice’s wife, Meira Sohlberg, posed a simple question while speaking to reporters in the aftermath of the attack: “We are children of Holocaust survivors; how can Jews hurt one another?”<sup>28</sup> The same question is posed in *Like Dreamers*, just inverted:

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<sup>26</sup> Neev, “Degel Hatorah to disband gov’t,” 12 May 2026.

<sup>27</sup> Levaton and Karmel, “IDF Manpower Shortage,” 27 March 2026.

<sup>28</sup> Fulbright, “A pogrom,” 4 June 2026.

“Could they really raise a hand against Jewish soldiers?”<sup>29</sup> Here, Hanan Porat—a prominent, influential member of the settler movement—wonders aloud for the reader whether or not the national religious movement would condone violence against IDF soldiers attempting to evacuate settlements in land that Israel had ceded.<sup>30</sup> In inhabiting Porat’s thought process, while maintaining a firm focus on Sohlberg’s lament, the most crucial consideration of President Rivlin’s entire speech becomes his description of the first pillar of his new partnership model for the Israeli polity: “that entry into this partnership does not require giving up basic elements of [each tribe’s] identity.”<sup>31</sup> As with the national religious tribe and the uprooting of their settlements by the secular tribe, when the partnership is forced and requires sacrifice—in particular, the sacrifice of a value which is not shared or mutually understood—a panicked but natural response is violence. Such a venting of tensions is now taking place under similar conditions by the Haredim.

In all, *Like Dreamers* serves four purposes. It proposes an alternative cause for Israel’s internal divisions today: the geopolitical consequences of Israel’s might rather than merely shifting populations. It adds nuance to contentious issues often reduced to their most extreme positions: through personification, the reader is forced to contend with the sympathetic positions of individuals who may think very differently from them. It provides a general framework for intercommunal conflict: many of the same crises that Halevi documents between the secular tribe and the nascent national religious tribe have metastasized to the current national (itself a mix of the former two tribes) relationship with the Haredim. And finally, it provides a glimmer of hope and glimpse of the future. If Israeli society is to go the way of President Rivlin’s grand partnership, there must necessarily be a great increase in contact between the tribes: and were there is collaboration, there is blending, creation, and hybridization. Long before such mixing became a semi-official part of the national project,

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<sup>29</sup> Halevi, *Like Dreamers*, pg. 502.

<sup>30</sup> In this case, the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in exchange for Israel’s first peace with an Arab nation.

<sup>31</sup> President Rivlin, *Israeli Hope*, 7 June 2015.

Halevi documented its roots. The Kook rabbinic family, whom over the course of *Like Dreamers* develop the spiritual foundations of what would become President Rivlin's national religious tribe, rigorously assert the righteousness of the entirety of the Jewish people: "in the Jerusalem Temple, the altar on which sacrifices were offered was wreathed with willows, because Israel's sacrifices would be acceptable to God only if all parts of the Jewish people—and not just the saints, the citrons—were included. 'There is no holy community of citrons!' Rabbi Zvi Yehuda repeated, outraged. 'Only the holy community of Israel!'"<sup>32</sup> Similarly, "Meir Ariel, the bohemian whose songs broke all the taboos of Hebrew music and who championed marijuana and spoke openly of his open marriage," develops over the course of the book a unique religiosity.<sup>33</sup> He praises Judaism as a "precious inheritance," describes pubs as "an honorable place where people gather, like a synagogue," and led a Torah study group in the secular city of Tel Aviv.<sup>34</sup> These instances of warm curiosity toward and impassioned defense of the other are lacking in the world today—but President Rivlin and Yossi Klein Halevi intimate they could return, not as novel social tools but, in fact, as intuitively familiar tradition. Of its four reasons to exist, this is *Like Dreamers'* most radical.

*In lieu of a formal rating, this review will simply recommend the reader to find a copy of Like Dreamers themselves (and for the author of this paper to procure Halevi's other works).*

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<sup>32</sup> Halevi, *Like Dreamers*, pg. 57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 623.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

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