

# Israel and the EU: Beyond the Horizon

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I am from the southern part of the Netherlands, from a province called Limburg, which was liberated in 1944 by American troops. We have a vast American cemetery in the south of Limburg in which over 8,000 US servicemen are buried. People from my part of the country sometimes adopt and maintain the graves there. For me, this was an opportunity to educate my kids about the history of our region and the history of World War II. If you express an interest in such an “adoption,” you are assigned a grave at random. We were given one about ten years ago and we went to see it. I only had the name of the soldier buried there, Leo Lichten, his date of birth, and the date he was killed: November 20, 1944. And I knew he was Jewish, because his grave had a Star of David on it instead of a cross. I also knew that he was from New York, because his place of origin and the unit in which he served—the 84<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division—were engraved on the headstone.

I then started searching for his family. It took me some years before I made any progress. But recently I discovered information about his parents, and I wanted to share that with you because in doing this research, I became much more aware of Jewish history than I had been before.

Leo’s father Max was born in 1894 in a *shtetl* in Galicia, which was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and is now in Poland. In 1912, Max traveled to Bremen, boarded the steamship *Königin Luise*, and sailed to New York. His mother, Mollie, was born in 1900 in Bazalia in what is now Ukraine, but was then part of the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union. In 1921, she traveled to Cherbourg and from there, aboard the *Aquitania*, to New York. The two met and married. They had two children, Bella and Leo. Some time later, the couple divorced.

But the very act of researching this history sparked my curiosity. I wanted to know why these people were called “Lichten,” how Jews acquired their surnames, why they left the places in which they were born and raised, and what it was like living in what is now Ukraine and Poland. One is easily overwhelmed and constantly wants to know more. And of course I will keep delving into that history.

I mention this now because it is a perfect example of how, even if they would like to, Europeans and Israelis cannot disentangle their common history and, therefore, cannot disentangle their common future.

I would like to share with you one more example, and then I will cease my personal digressions and move on to policy. Three years ago, my wife and I bought a house and we wanted to know something about its history. We discovered that during the war, two Jewish men had been hidden there and I found the story of the people who owned the house at the time. Their youngest daughter is still alive and I talked to her at great length. The men who were hidden were Walter Kaufmann, a German pianist, and Rudolf Jacob Zeller, a well-known portraitist from Hamburg. I managed to acquire two of his paintings and it is wonderful to have them.

Zeller had worked as a painter, mainly for wealthy families who commissioned him to paint their portraits. In 1935, he received a *Berufsverbot* [an order of professional disqualification under German law]. His wife, who was a Gentile, could not accept how Jews were treated in Nazi Germany, and she took her own life, leaving him with a son to look after. He managed to send the boy away to Ecuador, far from Europe. He left Germany and went to the Netherlands with his friend Kaufmann and they stayed in Zandvoort on the northeast coast. After 1940, when Jews were no longer allowed to live on the coast, they came and lived in the house that my wife and I later bought. However, in our neighborhood, there was also someone who was a supporter of the Nazis. He denounced a number of Jews who were hidden in the surrounding houses. Fortunately, he did not know about Kaufmann and Zeller. This Nazi sympathizer was eventually killed in the street, for fear that he would expose more Jews. But Zeller survived. And what I find so touching is the fact that he never understood why he was singled out for being a Jew. He never understood because he never regarded his Jewishness as something that set him apart. He was not a religious Jew. As he saw it, he was just a German painter.

This story has stuck in my mind. Of course we see what happened to us and what happened to the Jews with the benefit of hindsight. Perhaps we should look at these events through the eyes of great writers who lived in that period, such as Joseph Roth. In his books, you sense where it was all going, even though he did not know because he died before the war. Anyone who would today argue that antisemitism (or other forms of discrimination) is not a very dangerous game, and cannot end badly, should read his books. Roth's writings should be compulsory in schools and universities so young people can understand what it means to blame others for what is wrong in society.

Europe is going through a crisis. It is much more than an economic crisis. Some would say it is an identity crisis. I see Europeans from many countries who feel abandoned. By whom? By the system, by the government, by the economy. Then this age-old European—or should I say human—reflex comes into play: We have been abandoned so we need to blame someone. We are in trouble so we need to blame someone. For centuries, Jews were at the receiving end of this “blame game.” But today it is no longer the exclusive “honor” of Jews to be at the receiving end. We find other minorities being targeted as well. This is part of human nature.

If I understand a little bit about Jewish culture and heritage, it is that you do not deny human nature; you embrace it and tackle its dark side. This is something that we Europeans need to do. We need to stop denying that there is racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia in our society. We have to see it for what it is and tackle it.

I believe that Israelis and Europeans share a common heritage, a common belief, which is one of the greatest of all human achievements: a willingness to accept the “other” for who he is without condemning him. We should cherish that. But this takes hard work. I know one thing for sure: No matter how much we want antisemitism to disappear, it will be with us forever. However, it is the way we deal with it that matters—the way we deal with discrimination and the blaming of outsiders, the judging of people in our societies today not by what they do but on the basis of who they are. There is too much of this in our societies today. I do not think that because someone is Jewish, he or she does not do this. Everybody does, and it is a common challenge for us all.

When it comes to the relationship between the European Union and Israel there is always talk about double standards. And it is true. There are double standards. Even if Europeans do not admit it, they do judge Israel by different standards than they would judge other countries in this area. Why? Because deep down, Europeans see Israel as a European country. So they judge Israel in the same way they would judge other European countries. Sometimes this is perceived as unfair. On the other hand, the reaction to criticism of Israel and Israeli politics is sometimes unfair as well.

When I say that Israel is part of Europe it means more than being a member of the UEFA football association, the Eurovision Song Contest, or the Euroleague basketball federation; it is also about being part of a community of values whether one likes it or not. I understand why Israel, given its location, is reorienting its focus and policies toward other parts of the world. I see new attention being paid to BRICS and other emerging countries. This is a natural development. In international politics, where you sit is where you stand. If you are in a certain

region, you have to adapt to that region. That is a natural development. But what I want to bring across here, and in Europe as well, is that even with its geographical position, even with Israel's reorientation toward other nations and regions, there is no way we can ever disentangle the destiny of Europe from the destiny of Israel. And we had better face that fact.

In the Netherlands and other European countries, the Palestinian–Israeli conflict is seen as a zero-sum game: You are either for Israel or you are for the Palestinians. If you try to take a more neutral position, as I do, everybody is upset with you. The advantage of choosing sides is that at least some of the people will be happy with you. But if you refuse to take sides, there is a chance that everybody will be unhappy with you.

The EU should consider that whatever we choose to do or not do in terms of our policies, again, there is no way we can disentangle the destiny of Israel from the destiny of Europe. It is our common responsibility. In that sense, Europe needs to devise a more sophisticated policy for working with Israel. The contribution we have made today by creating a forum for cooperation between Israel and the Netherlands is a more sophisticated way of enhancing our relationship in the academic and economic fields.

In our talks, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu raised a number of issues that are of great relevance to Israel. Can we reclaim land from the sea? We, Dutch, have some experience with that, and we do it in a way that is environmentally acceptable. So why shouldn't we share the experience? Can we come up with ideas that will ensure people's privacy in cyberspace while simultaneously maintaining security? Can we work together on this scientifically, economically, and politically? Yes we can, and we will. Can we look for more business opportunities in a triangular way so that we can discover and open new markets in countries where perhaps these markets are now closed? Yes we can. These are the things we need to do.

Some European countries take the attitude that Europe has an alternative to offer to the peace process now being advanced by US Secretary of State John Kerry. I think it is a mistake to pretend that Europe has such an alternative. Europe's task is to fully support what the Americans have put on the table, to fully support both parties in trying to find a solution, and to be there, once a solution is found, if guarantees or support are needed.

I think the Netherlands can take pride in having great relations with both Israel and the Palestinians. This is an interesting position to be in.

Traditionally, a distinction has been made between the “hard power” of the Americans and the “soft power” of the Europeans. That paradigm is changing very quickly. In the next generation or so, you will witness Europeans and Americans working together, whether we want to or not, to tackle some very serious security challenges in the great expanse that starts on the west coast of Africa and ends in the Indian Ocean. I believe that this area will be a source of instability and challenges for the next generation.

We would all benefit from closer cooperation with Israel in confronting some of these challenges, especially given the information it has at its disposal and the security analyses it makes on a daily basis. I do not believe that what is going on in the Arab world is going to quiet down in the next couple of years. It is something that will go on for generations. Injustice and arbitrary borders were developed over generations. To undo that and create a new equilibrium will also take time.

There is something upon which I wish to elaborate, especially with young people in mind. Last week I was in Kyiv where young people are protesting because they want to be closer to Europe. The young men and women with whom I spoke are about the same age as my oldest children. My oldest daughter is 27; my oldest son is 24. When talking to the protesters, I was amazed by how much it was like talking to my own children. They have the same aspirations, the same wishes for themselves and their futures. They are not political in the traditional way that we were in our youth—identifying with left or right, etc. That is not their agenda. They want to create a better world. They are no less idealistic than people who previously called themselves Social Democrats or Christian Democrats, or liberals or conservatives. They don't think in those terms.

These students—these people under the age of thirty—make me optimistic. Whether they live in Israel, Holland, or Ukraine, most of them—unless they are in an economically difficult situation—have an incredibly open mind toward what is different and toward things they may not even understand yet. Because the information age has affected the way they think, most young people are open to seeking friendships and solving problems in a non-ideological way. This is a wonderful message, especially for a country like Israel, with its young, very intelligent, highly educated population.

I believe the task of my generation is to provide the younger generation with the knowledge we have acquired, and to combine their optimism, their will to change things, and their willingness to sacrifice for that (they are far less materialistic than we sometimes assume) with our generation's organizational skills, which they lack. Many of them think that once their cause is on Facebook, it is a reality.

But to get things done, you need to get organized; that is something the older generation knows.

I truly believe, as Willy Brandt once said, that any societal change is the consequence of an alliance between grandparents and grandchildren. That is a very interesting way of looking at things. Those people in Europe and in Israel who have known more difficult times—who had to work so hard for everything they earned—and those people in Europe and Israel who are now prepared to take two steps back to have a better future should join forces.

Among the members of the younger generation in Europe—I do not know about Israel—there is great disenchantment with politics and the political system. Moreover, there is a rising disenchantment with democracy, which they believe is unable to deliver on important issues such as climate change and global inequality. We need to educate our children in the art of using democracy to achieve their goals. This must be an international effort. This is also an effort that scholars need to think about, because in this day and age, we go to the polls every four years, but almost every night on television you can vote for a singer, an artist, a couple that dances—and your vote counts. People do experience direct democracy in this way. But when it comes to politics, they only vote once every four years and do not see that translated into what they want. This is so because they have not been educated in the nature of coalition politics, which is certainly a reality in Israel as much as it is in the Netherlands.

My call to the world of academia is this: Help us find new, innovative ways of translating this inherent human necessity to be heard, to influence one's environment—to be part of the decision-making process. Help us adapt that in a modern way so as to ensure that young people also see democracy as the best way forward. As Winston Churchill said, "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time." I think that this is still true today. As fathers and mothers, we have somehow failed our children by giving them too much freedom and sometimes withholding too much parenting.

Finally, I have no complete answers to the challenges we face. I know that it is hard for many outside of Israel, especially in Europe, to understand the position of Israel in this environment. It is also difficult, psychologically, to deal with an Israel that is strong—or that is perceived as such. It was easy to be Israel's friend when it was the underdog. This can be understood in terms of culture; it is part of our heritage as well. It is much harder to be Israel's friend when it is perceived as the dominant power in the region—the "top dog"—and as an unrelenting force that refuses to give in to justified requests from other parties. I think that both

images are wrong. We need to ensure that Israel is not backed into a corner and compelled to accept every demand in the belief that Israel's strength enables it to make unlimited concessions.

The Netherlands will do whatever it can to convince people that there will be no just peace without firm security guarantees for Israel. That would be impossible. This point comes across in all negotiations. But there can also be no just peace if people in Israel are not willing to live peacefully with the nation next door that deserves to become an independent country as part of a two-state solution.

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