

Israel Independence Day

Why Israel is Important to Me

I have been asked many times why the State of Israel means so much to American Jewry. Not only do non-Jews pose this question; some Jews do as well.

One obvious answer is that since the Holocaust every Jew feels that he needs an insurance policy. After all, European Jewry was not destroyed by ignorant savages or even radical Islamic fundamentalists. The executioners were Germans, the leaders of a nation that excelled in science, literature, and organizational skills and that was able to overrun all of Europe. Nor did the uneducated, the ruffians, or the rednecks of society provide most of the perpetrators of the Holocaust; to join the SS, a university education was necessary. If Germans could have developed the extermination camps, then Jews cannot feel safe anywhere in the world. At least Israel is our ancestral home which has to accept us if we have no other place to go.

In addition, the State of Israel serves for almost all Jews as a sign and symbol that G-d has not forsaken the Jewish people, that all the sacrifices that countless generations have made to assure Jewish continuity have not been in vain. Even the loss of six million sons and daughters did not mean the end of Judaism. *Am Yisrael chai!* The people of Israel live on and promise to enrich the world more than ever.

Thirdly, the State of Israel represents G-d working in history. Those Jewish philosophers who proclaimed that the Holocaust meant that G-d was dead were wrong. So many unlikely things had to happen to bring Israel into existence. The United States and Russia cooperated in 1947 to pass a UN resolution which called for the creation of a Jewish State. In spite of his rabid antisemitism, Stalin approved the shipment of large quantities of captured German war material from Czechoslovakia to Israel and thus enabled Israel to win its War of Independence. And ever since, Israel has benefited from a whole series of unforeseen events, not the least of which were the quick end of Communism and the settlement of over a half-million Russian Jews in Israel. Israel demonstrates to all Jews that G-d had not abandoned the world and, especially, them.

Indeed, when Christian friends question the deep American Jewish

concern for Israel, I answer with a comparison that is not fully exact but one that they grasp easily. I tell them that the Holocaust was our crucifixion and the State of Israel is our resurrection. They immediately understand that to Jews, Israel is not just a place, but a symbol of G-d's concern for the Jewish people and for the world.

Finally, in an odd way, the State and the land of Israel express in tangible form the Jewish notion of holiness. After Mark Twain visited Palestine a little over a century ago, he wrote in a book about his experience, *Innocents Abroad*, that Palestine was the most G-d-forsaken place he had ever seen, filled with malaria and wretched, sick, poverty-stricken human beings who could hardly scratch a living from its soil. It was a wasteland, not a holy land. What Mark Twain failed to understand is that the land of Israel is holy precisely because everything necessary for man is there, but located in the wrong place, and that only the labor of man can correct the imbalance. Without human effort, the land and the people on it cannot thrive.

There is a lot of water in the north, but the best agricultural land is in the center. The Negev comprises much of the land, but it almost never rains there and the climate is torrid. Israel possesses all kinds of soils, but many need fertilization and great care in order to sustain crops. Jerusalem, the holiest city in the world, is only 30 miles, a half hour's drive by car, from the Dead Sea and the lowest point on earth. Israel can flourish only if people work, and work together.

Human effort, of course, generally provides the basis of holiness in Judaism. A person is not considered holy who separates himself from the community or who engages solely in contemplation. The greatest sage is required to perform the same *mitzvot* as the most humble Jew. Knowledge of the law is even a worse excuse than ignorance of it.

When the 12 spies sent by Moses to scout the land of Canaan returned, they reported that it is indeed a land of milk and honey, but also one that "*ochelet Yashveha*." (*Numbers* 13:32.) The usual translation is that the land devours its settlers. Yet that description would seem to be belied by the size of the grapes they brought with them and their affirmation that it was a land of milk and honey. Therefore, the proper translation may well be that the word "*yashveha*" means "not settlers or inhabitants,"

but refers to "those who merely sit on it, who are not active." Israel devours those who remain passive, who expect to benefit from the land without doing anything. Only men of great size, hardworking giants, can survive there.

Thus, perhaps the best reason why the State of Israel means so much to us is that fellow Jews--survivors of concentration camps, inhabitants of Arab countries who escaped or were expelled with only their barest possessions, Russian Jews with a minimal relationship to Judaism--were able to create in less than half-a-century a nation that is envied by many countries and is beginning to serve as a light to the world. We are proud because its people did not sit still; they worked, fought, and accepted and conquered hardship. American Jews especially are proud because they, together with much of world Jewry, helped with their donations to make Israel a dwelling place for holiness.

We are One

Among the traits that enabled Jews to survive centuries of persecution and dispersion is the sense that *kol Yisrael chavairim*--all Israel is one family, mutual friends. Throughout Jewish history, Jews were ready to come to the aid of other Jews who were in trouble. We knew that if we did not take care of our own, nobody else would. According to the *Shulchan Oruch*, the Code of Jewish Law, in order to redeem captive Jews, a community could use money which was collected to build a synagogue and to support the poor. It could even sell *Torah* scrolls for that purpose. Jewish lives had priority over the most sacred objects.

History has been made rapidly during the past year. Communism has collapsed, the Berlin Wall has come down, and Russia is letting its Jews leave. Over one million Jews have already applied for Israeli visas. Over 150,000 Russian Jews are expected to make *aliyah* this year. In the next three years, as many as 750,000 Russian Jews may arrive in Israel.

Russia has always been an antisemitic land. Ivan the Terrible not only excluded Jews from Russia, but in 1563, when his troops took the Polish town of Polotzk, he ordered the Jews either to submit to baptism or be drowned. The beginning of the Romanoff dynasty in 1613 was marked

by a proclamation which stigmatized the previous ruler, Demetrius the First, as having brought with him from Poland not only heretics but even "Jews, the G-d killers." No Jews were allowed in Russia until the first partition of Poland in 1772, when 100,000 Jews came with the annexed land. They were promptly restricted to the infamous Pale of Settlement for a time and were forbidden to own land or practice the professions. Periodically, they were victimized by pogroms. Good Russian nationalists were usually anti-Jewish. The fact is that the majority of American Jews are here because of czarist antisemitic policies. Our parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents left Russia because they were afraid to remain there.

As the demise of Communism under Gorbachev has opened the way to strong Russian nationalist movements, antisemitism has come to the fore again. Pamyat openly blames the Jews for all of Lenin's and Stalin's excesses and demands their expulsion from Russia. The Jews are scared. They know that in the past Russian nationalists have meant what they said when they preached that Jews must either get out, be baptized, or be killed. Let us remember that the most vicious antisemitic document in modern history, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, was commissioned by the Russian secret police during the reign of the czars.

Because of the turmoil in Russia, as many Jews as possible must leave. The Chief Rabbinate in Israel has ruled that planes carrying Russian Jews to Israel may land on the Sabbath because *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of human lives, takes precedence over Sabbath observance. In Hebrew the word *domim* means blood, money, and silence. Jewish blood may flow in Russia if we do not raise the required money to rescue them. If we remain silent in the face of this challenge, we will be damned by the knowledge that we could have helped to rescue Jews but did not.

When the Nazis came to power, they soon discovered that not one country in the world was willing to accept Jews, and consequently, they felt free to launch the Holocaust. Thank G-d, there is an Israel now, whose gates are open to every Jew who wants to come. But Israel faces many problems. It has no oil; a good part of it is desert; that there is a shortage of water; and, above all, its neighbors are ready to pounce upon it the moment they think that it is militarily weak. However, much they want to welcome more Jews, the people of Israel cannot do it alone. They need our

financial aid. Operation Exodus is the great *mitzvah* of our time. Let us not delay! Let us not be petty! Let us give as much as we can, and give promptly!

Lessons from Geography

I have wondered what makes Israel so special. Why is it so sacred to so many people? Why of all the places in the world was it chosen as the Promised Land? Certainly other countries have more fertile soil, more spectacular scenery, more mineral deposits, even more desirable climates. What is there about this land that signifies holiness?

It wasn't until I toured the land from the Golan Heights to Ein Gedi that some answers came to mind. While passing through many different regions of Israel--the Galilee, the Beit Shean Valley, the Sharon, and the Negev--what struck me was that, although the fields that were tilled were lush and green, the fallow, uncultivated land was yellow and lifeless. In Israel, nature itself does not produce trees, crops, or vegetation. Man must labor to extract from the soil its potential to grow food and provide shade. Israel may be a land of milk and honey, but only if human beings are willing to sweat and toil.

Don't we have here an insight into the secret of holiness? In the *Kedusha* of the traditional *Musaph* Service for the Sabbath and holidays, we repeat the words of the angels heard by Isaiah: "Holy, holy, holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!" (*Isaiah 5:3*.) But then, we continue: "His ministering angels ask one another: 'Where is the place of His glory?'" A strange question, indeed, if the Lord's presence fills the earth. The answer is that while holiness is everywhere, it remains hidden until man, by his deed, word, love, and sacrifice, gives it form and body and exhibits the godliness that nestles within him and in the world at large. So, too, the holiness of Eretz Yisrael becomes visible only when our people returned to it, cultivated the fields, planted trees on the barren hills, built cities and schools, and brought the scattered tribes of Israel home from the four corners of the world.

The other fact that I noticed is the proximity of Jerusalem, the Holy City, to the Dead Sea, where the smell of sulphur recalls the Biblical ac-

count of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the archetypical cities of wickedness and sin. How short is the distance between purity and spirituality, on the one hand, and evil and ugliness, on the other. It is indeed easy to slip and go downhill until one reaches the lowest point on earth, the depths of failure and hopelessness. At the same time, though, Jerusalem is no further from the Dead Sea than the Sea is from Jerusalem. It is of course, much harder to climb up than to move down, but it is possible to see the heights of Jerusalem from the shore of the Dead Sea. Few men are doomed to stay in the depths forever.