

"THE MOOD IN ISRAEL"

My recent trip to Israel, from which I returned this past week, was qualitatively different from my many previous trips. I am still in the grip of the mood of the country -- indeed, too much so to be objective. I shall therefore leave the analysis for some other occasion, and offer now my personal impressions, given without claim to special expertise and without having been privy to any inside information.

The mood in Israel today is not a simple or homogenous one. It is quite complicated and often contradictory. Instead of describing it in over-all terms, it is best to identify the ingredients of this mood.

Perhaps the best way to begin is by observing the difference between us and the Israelis. During the first several days of the war, we recited tehillim (Psalms) at our daily services, and read the "Prayer for the State of Israel" with special fervor. But after a week or two we stopped, feeling that the danger had passed. In Israel, to this day, every service includes the recitation of tehillim.

It is true that the deep gloom has lifted somewhat, both because of the Geneva Conference (although Israelis hardly trust it), and the increase in tourism. The rise in tourism is uplifting for Israelis, especially since they correctly consider it as the barometer of what the world thinks of Israel's chances, much as the stock-market is a psychological indicator. It is hard to emphasize how important it is for us American Jews to visit Israel now.

But sadness remains a primary ingredient of the mood, and it is very real. אבל (mourning) grips so much of the country, both those who have lost members of their families and those who have lost friends or whose friends are in mourning. Never before have I seen so many people, especially children, rise to recite the orphan's kaddish in synagogues. It is not uncommon to see maimed or bandaged young men on the street. In many neighborhoods or kibbutzim the population is heavily female, with hardly a man in sight. A young lady from America, who accompanied her father on a trip, noticed that many of the bus drivers were wearing caps (kippot), far in excess of what she had noticed three years ago when she previously visited the country. She was bold enough to ask one of the bus drivers of the Egged line in

Jerusalem whether they had suddenly begun to employ more datiim (religious Jews) as drivers. The driver explained that many of them are Sephardim, and that the custom amongst them is that when they are in mourning for a close relative, they wear the kippah the whole year...

Even for the survivors there is not complete joy. For instance, youngsters in Jerusalem get a bit nervous when they hear the sound of jet planes overhead -- reminding them of the jet planes they heard that Yom Kippur day. When I visited the yeshiva in Gush Etzyon, I found a pervasive sadness because only one third of the student body was present -- those who come from overseas; the Israeli students are serving at the fronts. Shortly after my arrival, I received a telephone call from a colleague who teaches at the Tel Aviv University and who called to say hello because he had heard that I was in the country. We exchanged courtesies, and then I asked him about the situation. He broke down, crying over the phone, and explained that he had just begun to teach three days earlier, on Sunday, when the universities of the country opened up the first time since the war. He told me that he met many of his old students who had survived, but that though they may be whole in body, they were not whole in mind and heart. Some had been in Egyptian captivity, and reported to him that the tortures were so sadistic, so incredible, that they will never be the same. My colleague was dreadfully upset that this was remaining a secret, but apparently the government believes that, for diplomatic reasons, it is best not to publicize this fact. Some of the men who underwent these experiences were perplexed: at least the Nazis had an "ideology" about Jews being sub-humans and dangerous, but the Egyptians had no reasons whatsoever to perform their acts of mad sadism.

However, with this sadness there is another intangible element that I find extremely difficult to describe. I do not know how to identify it, whether as a peculiar Jewish historical awareness or an intensified grief. Perhaps it is best to refer to it as a special kind of dignity which allows one to keep his sanity and dignity intact in the face of the consciousness of all the grief of Jewish history telescoped into the short span of one's own lifetime. The story was told by President Katzir at the Seminar I attended. He decided to pay a condolence call to a father who had lost a son in battle. He came to the home, and offered his words of consolation to the father. After a while, the father looked up, thanked the President, and said to him: "Yes, I am consoled. I feel better this time than I did thirty years ago. Then the Germans

killed my father, but I never knew where his grave is; now, at least, the Arabs killed my son and I know where he is buried..."

In addition to sadness and what might be called dignity, there is also the element of powerful anger. There is a feeling, especially amongst soldiers who were at the front, that they were betrayed by the government's negligence. What is called the **מחדלים**, the terrible neglect and failures of the security set-up, are being investigated by a national commission of inquiry. But no matter what they will find, the charisma of the old leaders is dissipated, the halos are wilted, and no longer do they appear as shining and faultless heroes. One hopes that both Israelis and Jews of the Diaspora will now become a bit more sophisticated, and see people as only people, without looking for new heroes.

Part of this anger is revealed in the unusual kind of pre-election propaganda that appeared in the Israeli press this past week. I do not remember ever having heard anything of this sort. For instance, the **מערך** (Alignment), the major political party, announced to the voters:

אתה רוצה להעניש את המערך, "You want to punish the Alignment -- but consider what the alternative is..." In the English press in Israel, the same party published something of this sort: "You hold the government responsible -- but that is still better than an irresponsible government..." In other words, it is an open secret, to which the major party confesses, that they are responsible and punishable, but they ask for reelection because the others are even worse. All these are signs of a justifiable inner fury.

Following from this is, quite naturally, a feeling of frustration. Often, elections play a cathartic role, they allow the voter to vent his spleen, to get rid of his emotional excess. That did not happen this time in Israel. The elections proved -- almost nothing at all.

A distinguished columnist in Israel, Eliyahu Amicham, wrote on the eve of the elections what he once heard from a Communist Polish professor of law, who was an observer at the Eichman trial, about Polish elections, and he applied it as well to the current Israeli elections -- namely, that it is a sign of paradise. What does that mean? Because in Paradise, God took Adam, brought him to Eve, and said, "Here, choose a wife!" And so, Adam freely chose Eve...

The Israeli voter did not feel that he had a real, clear,

decisive choice to make. The structure of Israeli politics is such that he was confused. Polls show that about 40% of the electorate was undecided on the eve of the election. Hawks and Doves are not clearly definable in Israel. The extreme of either position is probably rejected by the great majority of all voters. Often, hawk and dove co-exist within the same person.

And then there is a feeling of suspiciousness as an important element in the mood of Israel, a suspiciousness which results from Israel's isolation. Some one put it well in the American press: "in every warm heart there is a cold spot for the Jews." One can hardly meet a single Israeli who does not believe with all his heart that the Arabs have only one ultimate aim: **היסול המדינה**, the dismemberment of the state. Israeli Arabists expect really nothing of substance to emerge from the current Geneva conversations. Dr. Kissinger is the topic of incessant conversation amongst the Israelis, much of it speculative and unrealistic. Israelis keep reminding themselves several times a day that Kissinger is really the foreign minister of the United States, not of Israel...

Counter-balancing all these negative elements in the national mood, are several brighter aspects. One of them is a manifestation of a great and noble Jewish virtue: gratitude. Israelis are grateful. They are grateful to President Nixon, much to the chagrin of many American Jewish liberals. They are grateful to Jews of the Diaspora for their assistance -- although, speaking for myself, I find that it is embarrassing, because I believe that American Jews could have done much more. They are especially grateful to Holland. During one of the days I was in Israel, young people stood at street corners in the large cities and distributed little red round stickers, to be placed on the lapel. They were in the shape of an orange, symbol of Israel, and within it was a windmill, representative of Holland. And on the perimeter were the words: **עם ישראל מוקיר את העם ההולנדי** "The people of Israel loves (or cherishes) the people of Holland."

Perhaps it will be a good idea for some American Jewish businessmen to build a proper, kosher, and lavish hotel in Holland, and for American Jewish organizations to encourage tourism, so that after Israel, Holland will be the favorite place for American Jewish tourists -- more than Paris, London, Tokyo, or even Puerto Rico.

There is also an element of justifiable pride in what Israel has accomplished. President Abe Harman of Hebrew University was right when he said that Israel on Yom Kippur was defending the right of every little country to exist. Israelis know that if the Arabs were to destroy Israel, no little nation in the world would ever be safe. They take pride in the valor of their soldiers, no-professionals who fought against overwhelming odds.

Especially magnificent was the role of the students of Yeshivot ha-Hesder, those "modern yeshivot" whose students served in the army alternately with studying at the yeshiva. These schools lost a disproportionately high number of their students, because it was they who were serving in the tank and paratroop corps on both fronts on that Yom Kippur day. Furthermore, students from such schools as Kerem Beyavneh, Har Etzyon, Yeshivat Hakotel, Shalavim etc., were also volunteering to serve as officiants during the High Holiday services. Their losses, their valor, their bravery, constitute a great modern instance of kiddush hashem.

Finally, I detected a new and deep questing and questioning. It is too early to call it התעוררות דתית, a religious renaissance. Sometimes, if one hurries to identify a new movement, he nips it in the bud and effectively kills it. What we are now witnessing is something much slower than the upsurge of feelings after the Six Day War, when we saw the pictures of paratroopers crying as they embraced the Wall. I feel that what is now going on is, perhaps because it is slower and more halting, something that is more profound and lasting than the euphoria of six years ago. It is a deeper, sadder, larger view of the tragic dimension of life, and with it comes a search for meaning. And the search for meaning is already a religious and spiritual quest.

One detects a kind of teshuvah, repentance, for the previous arrogance, over-confidence, and cockiness of so many Israelis, a feeling of regret and contrition for their loss of idealism which made them look more and more like American middle-class Jews.

There is a feeling, vague and inchoate, but conscious nonetheless, that the Yom Kippur War meant something, but they are not quite sure what it meant.

Perhaps this developing attitude for the Israeli during the Yom Kippur War can best be explained in terms of something we read in this morning's Sidra. Jacob, the dying patriarch,

called his children about him:

הֵאסְפוּ וְאָגִידָה לָכֶם אֶת אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָא אֶתְכֶם בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים.

"Gather around me and I will tell you what shall befall you in the end of days." It seems clear that Jacob intends to prophesy for his children, predicting to them their ultimate fate. Yet, after we read his poetic words, we notice that they are predictive only to a very minor extent, that they are mostly a combination of תּוֹכַחָה וְבִרְכָּה, of rebuke and blessing, and of a description of the collective character of his children. Somehow, then, the major body of Jacob's words does not follow clearly from his prefatory remark. Perhaps that is why the Rabbis, in the Midrash and in the Talmud, maintain that something happened at this moment: בִּיקָשׁ יַעֲקֹב לְגִלוֹת אֶת הַקֶּץ וְנִסְתַּלְקָה מִמֶּנּוּ שְׁכִינָה. Jacob indeed desired to reveal to his children the end of days, the advent of Messiah, but at that moment the divine Spirit departed from him and so he lost his predictive-prophetic faculty.

However, if I be permitted to offer an alternative explanation, I would say that Jacob never intended to prophesy to his children any detailed program of redemption at the end of days. Note carefully that the word he uses is not קָרָב, which we would normally expect in Hebrew as "befall" or "happen," but קָרָא, which literally means, "call." What Jacob meant to tell his children is this: I want to describe to you your own inner qualities, so that, at the end of days, no matter what the situation is, no matter what events present themselves to you, you will perceive them as challenges, as a summons from on high to respond with nobility and generosity, as a call from God to rise to new achievements and to greater heights.

Jews recognize that the Yom Kippur War was such a קריאה, such a call. It was a summons and a challenge. It revealed something. But we are not quite sure what that was.

Hence, requests for תְּשׁוּבָה קְדוּשָׁה, for religious articles such as tefillin and copies of tehillim (Psalms). I am fully aware that for many soldiers the little book of Psalms was more of a talisman than an opportunity to read words which would inspire them religiously. The request for tefillin has been derided by some as "foxhole religion." But that does not bother me.* I prefer that people come to religion out of gratitude and affluence, but the fact is that most people achieve a deeper recognition of their condition

* Better "foxhole religion" than pent-house agnosticism.

through crisis and hardship. What counts is the end result.

I might add that the Chabad people are not the only group who are distributing tefillin. The same is being done by Geshet, by the Mizrahi, by many small organizations of great significance, and by many private individuals who fill up their car with candy, liquor, cigarettes, and tallit and tefillin.

During the time I was in Israel, a small article appeared in the Israeli press which shows that the tefillin campaign even reaches beyond Israeli troops. Chabad people were at the Suez front, in the western bridgehead of the Israeli army in Africa, and were offering the tefillin to Israeli soldiers. The UN team was nearby, and engaged the Chabad people in conversation, inquiring after the meaning of the tefillin and their particular garb. One UN official was particularly persistent and inquisitive in his questions, and upon inquiry he revealed that he was a Swede by the name of Joseph Bergson. Are you Jewish? one of the Lubavitcher people asked. Yes, he was. Before five minutes were over, Joseph Bergson of the UN commission was "davening" in his tefillin...

My own experiences confirm this new quest. Three years ago I spoke to troops several times, younger boys and girls, and I found that it was not always easy to communicate with them. I felt, uneasily, that I was simply not on the same wave-length. I detected indifference, an anxiousness to emphasize the "normalcy" of Israel and the Jewish people, an aversion to considering themselves as different and special, and a closed mind to the religious word.

It is different today. I was asked to address troops, first in the Canal and then in Syria, but the "full high alert" prevented that. Instead I went to the Bikaah, on the Jordanian front, nearly half a kilometer from Jordanian soldiers. A Hassidic band played and another speaker and I addressed the troops. Our themes were Israel as the

עַם הַבְּחִירָה, the Chosen People; אמונה or faith; not wasting their special talents; questioning, searching. I found them not only receptive, but also participating. And in the dancing there was sheer ecstasy. Here were 300 soldiers, combat engineers, who took time out from laying mines and anti-tank traps, 80% or more officially "non-religious," who sang and danced to such songs as עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי and other, new melodies both from American and Israel, with the abandon that comes from זבקות, or religious fervor. As one

visitor pointed out, it was like a Hasidic wedding, without a bride and a groom.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you one story that I heard, first person, from a brother of a cousin of mine. It tells us something about the hope and the feelings that motivate our Israeli brothers. This young man emigrated with his very young family from the Lower East Side and he became an Israeli citizen. He was assigned to the reserves that served on the Bar Lev Line on that fateful Yom Kippur day.

Ephraim was one of 200 men, whom he referred to humoursly as "third class infantry soldiers," most of them married with children, in the 24-38 year old bracket. These were part of the חטיבת ירושלים, the brigade of soldiers drawn from the Jerusalem area, the one that was most hard hit during the war, stationed near Kantara.

Ephraim told me of how they were attacked by 50,000-60,000 Egyptian soldiers, how the more he picked the enemy soldiers off with his machine gun, the more swarmed over the Canal. After several hours of battle, his own group was mauled and many of his close friends killed or wounded. Shortly thereafter, there came the order from his commander for his group to withdraw back into the desert toward the Israeli lines. Some 47 men departed and broke into two groups, as they made their way through the minefields back to their own lines. Ephraim and 22 others broke off from the rest of the troops, and they decided that each could take but one object with him. Most men chose an Uzi, the submachine gun. Ephraim took an Uzi but also decided to take along his tallit, and one of the other men chose a pair of tefillin. For one and a half days they made their way through the desert, avoiding enemy fire. Then they noticed that they were caught in cross-fire, in between the Egyptian and Israeli lines, both sides firing on them. The Egyptians assumed, correctly, that they were Israeli soldiers. The Israelis thought, incorrectly, that they were Egyptians. At one point they made their way to the top of a hill, behind some bushes. The Israeli tanks thought that they were enemy tanks, and instead of firing with machine guns, aimed their cannon at the 22 Israeli soldiers. The cannon fire kept on getting closer, while the soldiers tried desperately to get a wave length, on their wireless radio to contact the tanks and tell them they are Israelis. But it was all to no avail and they expected the worst. And what seemed the last moment, Ephraim realized that he had with him the best form of communication: he unfurled his tallit and waved it. At first,

the Israeli tanks thought it was an Egyptian robe, but they quickly recognized it, got out of the tanks and beckoned to them to run over. Thus were 22 Jewish souls saved because of Ephraim's tallit.

Ephraim told me, after repeating this story, that he just "knows" that holding the Egyptians down the first two or three days was something that could not be explained by natural, logical, military categories or concepts. Something more was at work. It is inconceivable, he told me, that this was anything but a miracle -- and the miracle came soaked in pain and grief and anguish...

I conclude this description of Israeli's mood with the story of Ephraim Holland and his tallit, not because I believe in the magical properties of religious artifacts. I do not. But to me it is symbolic, deeply and gloriously, of Israel, its faith, and its great hope for its future.

Recall that Israel's colors, white and blue, originally were chosen because of the תכלת ולבן, the white and blue tzitzit that once were part of the tallit. (Now it is all white).

The tallit is thus the symbol of Israel, both state and people, and it is the tallit, and the faith in the Almighty that it represents, that can and will save us.

When donning the tallit in the morning, many pious Jews recite a preliminary prayer in which, amongst other things, we say:

יְיָ מַצּוֹת צִיצִית תַּנְצֵל נַפְשִׁי רוּחִי
וְנַשְׁמָתִי מִן הַחַצּוֹנִים, וְהַטְלִית יְפְרוּשׁ כַּנְפֶּיךָ
עֲלֵיהֶם בְּנֶשֶׁר יַעֲרֵךְ קֶנֶן עַל גּוֹלֵי יְרוּשָׁה.

"And by virtue of my observance of the commandment of the tzitzit, may my soul be saved from all dangerous and demonic forces in the world. May the tallit raise its corners over me and protect me, like an eagle spreading its wings over its nest to protect its young."

May that tallit be the symbol of wings of the Shekhinah, as the Almighty God of Israel offers us protection and security and love, so that we may go into the uncertain future calmly, prayerfully, successfully -- and peacefully.