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Reflections: Israel at 50

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Only one who was born before the 1948 declaration of the State of Israel and was old enough to remember those bitter years of the Holocaust, can *truly* appreciate the meaning of the Jewish state in its most immediate and elementary sense. For those under the age of 60 or 70, the evaluation of the State and its significance will always and of necessity be somewhat incomplete. History learned is not the same as history lived.

This does not mean that the Holo-

caust exhausts the importance of Israel either as a divine gift and intercession in history or as a new political entity. Nor does it mean that those born after statehood was established cannot understand or are not permitted to expound on its ideological or theological place in the hierarchy of Jewish values. It does mean that beyond all religious, political, or social views on Israel, there is a deep, visceral, gut feeling that is existential and experiential and that cannot be successfully transmitted in the idioms of speech or any ordinary communication. One cannot appreciate the renewal of life unless and until he has stared the Angel of

Death in the eye or, at least, felt on his face the wind of the passing Destroyer as he was abroad in the land.

This introduction is necessary if these impressions are to be, as has been requested of me, "personal reflections." My views of Israel, then, come against a background of one who as a youngster heard over the radio the depraved ranting of Hitler announcing the *Anschluss* of Austria and the anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi sermons of Father Coughlin; who read Ford's obscene attacks against Jews; who met the first refugees from the European genocide and could not believe that the

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horror stories they told were possible; who recalls the NY Post headline, when returning from high school, announcing the number of martyrs as 6 million, and so on. I therefore grew up with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that we American Jews were next on Hitler's list of extinction, that I and my parents and brother and sisters were candidates for the concentration camps and for a premature death. I even remember, with cruel clarity, the serious discussions in my family as to whether suicide should be seriously entertained if the Nazis invaded and conquered America.

For me, all the theoretical discussions about Israel pale beside this elementary fact that had we Jews had a state we might well have escaped the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust. That is why, when in May 1948 a few classmates from Yeshiva College and I went to work in a clandestine laboratory in upstate New York developing a rocket bullet for the young state's as yet non-existent armament industry, we felt it was the only way we could respond to the exterminations and the threats in a helpful and dignified manner. We didn't sing patriotic songs, we didn't debate theological issues, we didn't ask if our Israeli scientist supervisors were *Datiim* or Socialists; we were, all of us, Jews who might well have been one of the statistics but now could express ourselves as Jews -- any kind of Jews.

This historical fact itself has religious significance. If an individual is saved from death he is required to offer a *birkat hagomel*, and if his salvation was miraculous he must celebrate the anniversary of his deliverance thereafter as his personal "Purim." Certainly and halakhically a whole people that has emerged from the depths of despair to new hope must express thanks to the Almighty -- without caviling about any necessary Messianic dimensions. We have no precise information as to what if any links exist between the *yeshuat am yisrael* we experienced with the creation of the State of Israel and the coming of *mashiach*. I, therefore, am

skeptical as to the appropriateness of the whole *atkhalta d'geulah* school and I do not recite the words *rayshit tzemikhat geulataynu*, in the "official" Prayer for the State of Israel. I neither confirm nor deny the Messianic nature of our redemption. That is for G-d to say and for Him to reveal when He will so will it. It is enough for me that this was the state founded for the broken shards of our people, and that had we only had it earlier...

Of course I regret the secular domination of public life in Israel. I would much prefer that its Jewish character be more pronounced -- provided that could be done voluntarily. I am against "coercion" except for the most basic elements of national cohesiveness, such as a single standard for entry into Jewish peoplehood. Other than that, political-legal coercion has brought us more grief than joy.

I do not believe that nationalism -- Zionism, in our case -- exhausts the content of Judaism or is even the chief guarantee of Jewish continuity. I equally reject the thesis that it is "treif," that is somehow antithetical to the values of Torah. It is enough for me that it was instrumental in establishing the state founded for the broken shards of our people, and that had we only had it earlier...

I am not blind to some of the uglier aspects of Israeli life which have surfaced this past half century in various sectors of the country whether in the secularist circles or, as well, in Orthodox life, including Religious Zionism with which I identify as a movement, although not as a political party. I am troubled by the directions taken by various groups in Israel. But no matter -- they are all my family and I will stand by them through thick and thin, and I will celebrate with them, drink a *lechayim* to them on the "golden wedding" occasion, and reaffirm to them openly and joyously my love and my fealty and my undiminished gratitude.

Why? Because, to repeat: It is enough for me that this was the state founded for the broken shards of our people, and that had we only had it earlier...*Oh, if only we had had it earlier!*



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