

SOME FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A VISIT IN ISRAEL

I

Some three months ago, when I left for Israel, I told my congregation that I was doing so with mixed feelings: I was sorry to leave them, but expectantly anticipating my visit in the Holy Land. Now that I have returned, I do so once again with mixed feelings, but in the opposite direction.

We were sorry to leave Israel, for it is beautiful beyond words. The report that we bring back to our congregation is identical with that brought by Joshua and Caleb to their "congregation of the Children of Israel," when they said: "The land, which we passed through to spy it out (or, better, la-tur should be translated 'to tour it'), it is an exceedingly good land" (Nu. 14:7). We fell in love with the land, both with its avir and its avira, with its air and its atmosphere, its meteorological climate and its social and spiritual milieu. So reluctant were we to leave, that many members of the Lamm family -- indeed, all of them -- wept as they left Jerusalem. And yet we are happy to be back in the bosom of our family, with our friends and beloved congregation, reunited with the faces we know and enjoy and are so comfortable with.

However, in one significant way my negative feelings are far more pronounced now. For I am profoundly and immeasurably saddened

that my return has been marred by the cruel suddenness of the death of two trusted associates and exceedingly dear friends. Without them, The Jewish Center will never be quite the same again. All during this week I felt that their presence permeates every part of this building. Their presence is here, but they are not; and all of us are the poorer for it. All of us, therefore, shall have to rededicate ourselves to The Jewish Center and to the cause which it serves, and thereby perpetuate the memory of these noble souls.

II

The impressions with which I return are too many to be conveyed in one talk. Besides, not enough time has elapsed for me to gain a sufficient perspective to organize them coherently. No doubt, they will be reflected from this pulpit in the weeks and months to come, please God.

Today, I would like to touch on a number of preliminary points that impress an American visitor. I say "visitor," not "tourist." For there is a vast difference between viewing Israel as a resident and viewing it as a tourist; between the vantage point of a home, and that of the lobby of the King David Hotel; between seeing the sights and living the life of Israel.

One final word of introduction: there are negative features too to the reality called Israel. Unless one is aware of them and

understands them and attempts to help overcome them, he performs no service for Israel. Overridealization and overromanticization of Israel can be dangerous as it is unfair to the Jewish state, its government and society, and people. Nonsense, even well intentioned nonsense, serves no cause well.

III

The first major impression I bring with me concerns differences in psychology between Israeli and American Jews. I learned that there really is such a thing as a galut-psychology.

An Israeli friend has pointed out to me that this difference in psychology is reflected in the change from last week's portion, Vayehi, to this week's portion, Shemot. The hero of last week's reading was Joseph, that of this week's reading is Moses. Joseph was the galut-Jew par excellence. He was Yosef Ha-tzaddik, a pious and observant Jew. He sought at all times to protect Jewish interests, and provided for his brethren the land of Goshen. But his main interest and the major service of his life he gave -- to Egypt. In the end, his entire fortune, both materially and intellectually, was left to Egypt; all that Israel got were the atzmot Yosef, his remains, his bones.

Moses, although he was born in the palace of Pharoah and not in the Land of Israel as was Joseph, was just the reverse: he was a

Jewish leader who gave all his fabulous potentialities and capacities to Jewry, to the Promised Land; all that remained for the Diaspora was -- his remains, interred beyond the River Jordan. Moses began his career of Jewish leadership when he was outraged by the patent injustice perpetrated against his own people: "And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their suffering; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren" (Exodus 2:11). He identified with his brethren, and accepted their interests as primary. He was not a galut-Jew, though he lived in the golah. He was not impressed with mah yomru ha-goyim, with what the non-Jews will say -- as was Joseph, who went to great pains to dress his aged father properly and to teach him how to speak in order that he should not be embarrassed when the old man appears before Pharoah and the royal court. Moses was not afraid of a Security Council, nor, I believe, would Moses have panicked had he been scolded by the imperious editorial writers of the equivalent of the New York Times.

Israeli Jews are similarly unafraid. I do not mean that they perform heroics, and that they thumb their noses at the entire world. They are practitioners of realpolitik and understand the principles of power and appreciate the necessity for alliances. Israeli Jews, unencumbered by a galut-psychology, accept it as quite natural and

normal for a people, like individuals, to put its own interests first. That is why, although they were angry at the way France ruptured its relationships with Israel, they were not quite as emotional as American Jews when France betrayed Israel for the Arab cause. They felt that it is only right for France to tend to its own interests first. And that too is why they fault American Jews for excessive liberalism on the Vietnam question. They feel that we American Jews have not only identified ourselves generally with the anti-Vietnam stance, but that we have given the impression abroad that fighting against involvement in the Vietnam war is part of the function of being an American Jew, that being anti-Vietnam is an expression of Judiasm. We have created the impression that we are against any American effort to fight off Russian or Communist incursions any place in the world. We have signalled the American government that it is the Jewish stand that America refrain from confronting Soviet imperialism wherever it may arise. Therefore, American Jews have sacrificed their own interests on the altar of amoralizing liberalism -- by compromising Israel's opportunities to get America to provide the deterrent against any possible massive Russian intervention in the Middle East. I am not commenting on the politics or morality of this criticism; but it is something I have heard from many, many important Israelis in all sectors of government

and society, and it is important for us to think upon it carefully.

The self-confidence of the Israelis is amazing and reassuring. Here they are, three million Israeli citizens surrounded by a sea of millions upon millions of Arabs. And yet, when they bade farewell to the Lamm family returning to the United States, whether at the special farewell events or over the telephone or meeting neighbors in the streets, almost all of them to a man expressed pity and compassion for us because we were leaving the serenity, the security, and the safety of Israel for the uncharted jungles of the streets of New York!

The feeling of confidence, after ~~a~~while, becomes infectious. When, in the first week of our stay in Israel, in Netanyah, an automobile was mined some five blocks away, we felt apprehensive. But, when two weeks ago at the end of our stay, a Katyusha rocket exploded one and a half blocks from our home in Jerusalem, we read about it the next day in the newspapers, shrugged, and went on to other things. The equanimity is contagious.

The same non-galut-psychology results in a kind of generosity of spirit. Imagine if some important Anglo-Jewish newspaper were to publish a special supplement for Christmas. We could be angry, outraged, and our indignation would be thoroughly justified. Yet when the Jerusalem Post published a Christmas edition for tourists and Christian citizens, I took the exact opposite point of view after

my first impulse of annoyance: here we are in the majority, we need feel no embarrassment or humiliation in making a magnanimous gesture to the visitors and to the minority groups. And what a good feeling that is! When one is at home, he can afford to be more generous than when he is in some one else's home.

IV

Related to this is a second point, that of identity.

Here in the United States, Jewish identity is problematical; in Israel it is taken for granted by an overwhelming majority of the people, with the possible exception of a small group of individuals who call themselves Kenaanim. There, Jewishness is a fact, not an idea; a reality, not a desideratum. Here, there is hardly a parent who someplace in the back of his mind or the bottom of his heart has not begun to worry about whether his children and grandchildren will marry within the fold and remain Jewish; there, such problems rarely occur. Jewish identity is natural and visible -- let alone in Meah Shearim (and Meah Shearim is not all Neturei Karta!) on Saturday night, when walking or even driving through the streets one sees the Hasidim, still clad in their Sabbath best of shtreimlech and bekishes, whether on the old patriarchs or on the little boys running along, as if they still bear with them the glory, the beauty, the very delicious odors of the Sabbath that had just departed; let

alone the Kotel, no longer the Wailing Wall, on Friday night -- that Kotel which, despite all the cynicism which you bring towards the hypersentimentality associated with it, works its glorious magic on all those willing to listen to it -- where one prays, whether with Sephardim or Ashkenazim, whether with the Vishnitzer Hasidim on the left or the Boyaner Hasidim on the right, or with the more modern Israeli Yeshivat HaKotel in the center; but even on the decidedly unspiritual campuses of the Universities, even in Leftist kibbutzim -- and the kibbutzim, whether of left or right, seem to be the last strongholds of sensible and mature ideology left in the world today; in the very streets of the cities, especially that incomparable city of Jerusalem, where the very stones are the color of kedushah! How right Bialik was when he said that in Eretz Israel even the goyim are Jewish!

And that is something we must learn to develop here. Identity as Jews will never be as unproblematical in the Diaspora as it is in Israel, but Israel can serve as an ideal and a model for Jewish communities elsewhere.

This idea concerning Jewish identity has been expressed, obliquely but beautifully, in a comment by the great Hasidic sage, the author of Benei Yisaskhor. We read this morning of the directions given by Pharoah to the Hebrew midwives, who play such a crucial role in the

entire Exodus story:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לַחֲמוּסֵי הַיְּהוּדִים מִי שֵׁם הָאֶחָד
שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִי פוּאָה

"And the King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of one was Shifrah and the name of the other Puah" (Exodus 1:15).

Now, that is a patently incomplete sentence; any teacher of composition would mark it wrong were it handed in by a modern student. Furthermore, the next sentence begins with the word Vayomer, "And he said."

Clearly, what the King of Egypt said in the first sentence has been omitted. What does the verse mean? Our Hasidic sage offers an answer based upon the Jewish tradition that Shifrah and Puah were really Yocheved and Miriam, the mother and sister of Moses. Now, "Shifrah" and "Puah" are not Hebrew but Egyptian names. Hence, what the Biblical verse means is this: And the King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, that the name of one shall be Shifrah and the name of the second shall be Puah. Pharoah wanted them to change their names, their clothing, their language, their culture -- he wanted them to transform their very self-definitions from a Jewish to an Egyptian identity! Pharoah wanted to wear down their Jewishness by changing their names as a beginning. It is to their everlasting credit and tribute that they resisted this assault upon their Jewish identity. And that is precisely what we are called upon to do today: to learn

from the Israelis to take our Jewish identity as natural, and not to apologize for it.

V

The third point is one which I was aware of before, but which was vigorously reinforced on my recent visit. That is, that there must be an ongoing and more intensive relationship and dialogue between Israel and the Diaspora. On this depends the very future of the Jewish people.

A week or two ago, Menahem Begin told me that to his mind there are three centers of world Jewry today: American Jewry is the financial heart, Israel is the spiritual center, and Russian Jewry is the moral focus of the world Jewish community. Now, that is not altogether correct. Thus, American Jewry has some significant spiritual and moral treasures. But there is a large element of truth in this general formulation.

Unquestionably, American Jewry must continue to underwrite in even greater measure than heretofore the defense and development and education of Israel. And we must do so without complaining, for the Israeli citizen pays much more than we do. His enormous taxes -- the highest in the world -- are his own participation in the defense and development of the country, its education, and the ingathering of refugees and immigrants.

But it is not a one-way street. Next week, please God, we shall discuss in greater detail some aspects of the religious situation of Israel, and the specific contributions that American Jewry can make other than simply signing checks, although that is included. One of those contributions, both to Israel and the bonds that tie Jews throughout the world together, are the great religious and educational institutions that we have built in this country.

You have no idea how attractive Yeshiva University is to Israelis of all sectors, how they would welcome it, how deep its influence already is upon Israel as an idea and a model and symbol even without being there physically.

You have no idea how synagogues like The Jewish Center would be welcome in Israel, how they are not a purely local phenomenon in America, how the idea of what we represent -- the confluence of cultures, the form of service we strive for -- how all this makes an impression on Israelis and is carried to them by visitors that come back and forth.

Hence, the upbuilding -- financial, educational, moral -- of such institutions is a major contribution not only to American Jewry, but to world Jewry and to Israel as well.

Most Israelis I have met, though they clamour for an American aliyah, and challenge every visitor with the question, "When are you

coming?" have outgrown the simplistic notion that we shall all come overnight, or the Ben-Gurion-expectation that we will all come if we are sufficiently scolded. Israelis are now even mature enough not to consider that American Jews who invest in their communal institutions are betraying Israel by making the golah too permanent. Indeed, what Israel needs now is both our direct help and our indirect help -- by remaining proud, intelligent, committed Jews. They are deeply concerned by the fallout of our younger generation, its assimilation, its leftist politics, its hippiedom. If we shall thrive as a committed, knowledgeable, Israel-conscious Jewish community, it will be good for Israel; otherwise it will not. Perhaps we ought to paraphrase what an ex-Secretary of Defense of this country once said: What is good for them, is good for us; and what is good for us, is good for them.

So let us continue to develop this interrelationship. Let us have access to each other, support each other, reinforce each other. And this is expecially true of leadership. I have told it to young leaders in Israel, and it is at least equally true of those who aspire to leadership in this country: It is a practical urgency and a moral prerequisite for leaders in each of these two communities to have a deep experience of the other. Israelis must know American Jewry well before they become Israeli leaders; and Jewish religious

and communal leaders must have profound experience of Israel before they are entrusted with leadership in American Jewry.

These, then, are some of my first impressions: the psychology of confidence, the identity as Jews, the interrelationship of both communities.

But above all, with all my desire to see the building up of American Jewry, and with all the quantitative superiority of American Jewry over Israel, I am convinced beyond a question of doubt: there, there is the center of a stage on which the drama of Jewish history is being played out in modern times and will continue to be played out until the end of time. That, to use the modern colloquialism, is "where the action is."

"It is a land which the Lord thy God cares for; the eyes of the Lord thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year" (Deut. 11:12).

Without being too anthropomorphic, may I say that God hears about us here; His ears are open. But He looks at Israel, His eyes are directed there.

He is concerned about us -- but He is interested in and delights in them.

And even as His eyes are turned to Eretz Israel, so may our eyes behold the Land close up: to live there, if possible; to stay there for a long while if not. But if only for short trips -- go,

go, go.

But go not merely as a tourist; rather go as a pilgrim, an oleh regel.

For a tourist is one who goes to see the sights. Whereas a pilgrim goes -- in search of a vision.