

Israel at 60

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Everyone else is giving an opinion on Israel's sixtieth. Even notional Jews who have had absolutely no positive involvement in Jewish life whatsoever have suddenly come out to relieve themselves of their own antipathies by excoriating Israel. Hope it makes them feel better. Here's my contribution.

If having a state was, as some Zionists ideologues dreamed, going to normalize Jews, to make them a nation like any other, then there could be no expectation of anything more than yet another body politic with its interests and inevitable corruptions.

In the years before statehood, my late father was president of British Mizrachi, the Religious Zionist organization. He was a passionate religious Zionist. Judaism, he argued, was not designed to be a religion of an exilic minority, but lived as a holistic, religiously animated community, where it was the dominant culture and language.

When Mizrachi went into politics in Israel in 1948, he resigned. Thus I was brought up in a house that was ideologically committed to the idea of returning to our homeland, but strongly opposed to religious parties and their politics. We were educated to love and to criticize. Religious values demanded and required ethical behaviour, honesty, and sensitivity to all humans. I hoped, but was soon disillusioned.

Much of the world fell in love with Israel then. Any left-wing student worth his or her salt went to work on a kibbutz. But what the world loved then was an image of new socialism, not Judaism. When I first went to study in Israel as a teenager in 1956, I was shocked to discover the extent of secular, anti-religious fervor. Now, it was said, one could abandon one's religious, spiritual heritage with an easy conscience, knowing one was building a modern, post-ghetto Jewish world. This was no Jewish State and secular Zionism had nothing to say to me. I even had some sympathy with Neturei Karta at the time, for refusing to sully themselves by entering a political system whose ideas and ideals were so diametrically opposed to theirs (until I discovered their corruptions and betrayals).

Despite this, I am thankful for what I regard as the miracle of a state for Jews, a refuge on the one hand, but also a source of pride. After two thousand years, to return to sovereignty against such odds and after such extended inhuman treatment, what else qualifies as a miracle as great as the parting of the Red Sea?

By culture I was and am an internationalist. I hold no brief for flags, anthems, and the sad trappings of nationalism. But for as long as nationalism is the flavour of the day, as long as the Kosovars can have a state, it cannot be just, logical, or equitable to deny Jews the same. And for as long as there are plenty of Muslim states it can only be disingenuous to deny Jews

one.

Yet self-interest never obscured the challenges and problems. We were, after all, claiming a disputed home. Even the combative Ben Gurion conceded this was a conflict of two rights. I recall a mood in the fifties of desperately wanting peace and a desire to live in harmony and equality with Arabs wherever they were. So much was made of Christians, Druze, and Bedouin serving in the Israeli army. Despite the ongoing conflict, then and today, there is so much being done to try to repair, to build bridges. But it gets hardly any recognition and is submerged beneath the blood of conflict.

I was studying in Israel in 1967. I recall that the initial aftermath of the Six-Day War was so euphoric not just because we had survived the threat of obliteration. It was euphoric precisely because we thought that now, at last, there would be peace and Palestinians would have their own state. The overwhelming majority of Charedi rabbis in those days advocated "Land for Peace". The rejectionists were oddities.

Slowly, it changed. I recall the pain of rejection after Khartoum and then the reaction, the arrogance, Kahana, settlements, continued occupation and agony. I have always feared zealotry and never much liked religious fervor when it spills over from the personal encounter with God into the public realm. I have always admired the painful honesty of Yeshaya Leibowitz, who cried for the soul of an occupational military culture. I knew it could never be good, but I wondered how else one could protect oneself from those who wished to destroy and refused to talk.

Another miracle of Israel has been trying to integrate such diverse and opposite races and communities from every corner of the globe. No other country has ever tried it as repeatedly and with such high proportions as Israel. It has not always been fair or smooth. There have been many casualties, but fewer than one sees in the ghettos of Europe, or even America.

I was delighted when the Sephardim, thanks to Menachem Begin, threw off the arrogant, humiliating, left-wing Ashkenazi yoke. But then I looked at the passionate hoards and feared the mindless populism. I noticed how each new generation of immigrants was made to suffer, like children bullied in school make sure that when they reach seniority they get their own back. There was always a mood of besting the other, and of course the problem of how best to deal with an Arab minority that, despite its precious citizenship, was seen as a fifth column and has all but been pushed into self fulfillment of it.

Yet, for all that, I was amazed that Israel turned into such a great country, despite itself. The arts, music, literature, and intellectual activity of all sorts flourished. Universities sprouted up all over the place. Idealism could be found in as much variety and color as could the worst aspects of average humanity. Yes, there was bureaucracy, corruption, proteksia, political haggling, and siphoning. Despite it all, everything good was flourishing too, and in recent years the economy, entrepreneurship, has made Israel one of the success stories of the technological era. Even the many Israelis who have left to succeed elsewhere still often contribute indirectly to Israel's

successes. And the fact that I had nothing in common with most secular Israelis simply emphasized the complexity and contradictions of Jewish identity in a modern world.

Much maligned religion, in all its monochromes, has flourished in Israel beyond expectations too (though with growth has come with intellectual regression and intolerance). Never, ever in Jewish history have there been so many yeshivahs, kollels and institutes of higher learning. I have watched the precocious child grow into a giant so that no Jewish community in the world comes near it in creativity, scholarship, and richness, not even the USA. No diaspora community today survives without Israeli input in one form or another, through its teachers, its rabbis, and the thousands who go there to study and return to enrich local scenes.

Yet war and violence continue. The Almighty, it seemed, has wanted us to suffer. The Talmud says we can only acquire our land through suffering. Nothing has changed in the three thousand years of our existence. We have always been accused of taking someone else's land, made the wrong alliances, the wrong decisions, betraying our principles and our God. Yet somehow we have survived. So I am optimistic, where logic tells me I am a fool. Just as I am optimistic about human nature, for all that it is self-indulgent, excessively acquisitive, and egotistic.

Israel remains a country divided against itself, subject to so much hatred. There's so much wrong. It reminds me of the blind and bound Samson in Gaza. Yet it is, nevertheless, so vibrant, creative, and alive. If that's not an ongoing miracle, I don't know what is.