

Wonderful Accidents

May 1948 and 1967

This past week we celebrated the declaration of Israel's independence in 1948 and the return of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967. In both cases the political leadership in Israel, tended towards caution. But it was the determined decisions of individuals with guts and a sense of what the moment required, that changed the course of our history. With quite fundamental and cataclysmic results.

May 1948

Colin Shindler published an interview in the Jewish Chronicle last week that he had several years ago with the late Arie Handler, the British former Mizrahi Religious Zionist leader, who was present at the ceremony in 1948.

Handler described how divided the Jewish leadership in Palestine was. The Jewish Agency was the de facto body that ran affairs for the Jewish community under the British Mandate. Whereas the Arab Nationalists had not been able to form a government in waiting and expected others to act on their behalf, the Jews had.

The United Nations had voted for partition, which the Jewish Agency had accepted despite strong opposition from the Right Wing, which wanted all the Mandate territory, not just the partitioned area. But the Arabs had rejected it all anyway. When the British withdrew, they had handed significant amounts of arms to the Jordanian Arab Legion, expecting them to drive the Jews into the sea and solve the problem of partition unilaterally. The question was should the Jews declare independence on what was offered or wait for the situation to clarify. Caution or risk?

"The council of the provisional government voted 6-4 in favour of declaring a state. Ben-Gurion and Sharett of Mapai, Aharon Tzislung and Mordechai Bentov of Mapam, Moshe Shapira of Hapoel Hamizrahi and Peretz Bernstein of the General Zionists were in favour. Eliezer Kaplan and David Remez of Mapai, Pinhas Rozenblueth-Rozen of the Progressives and Behor Shitrit of the Sephardi party were against.

"Ze'ev Sharef, the secretary of the political department of the Jewish Agency, was told to organize invitations for the declaration at the Tel Aviv museum, literally the day before. No one knew if it would actually take place."

The arguments revolved around whether one should appease, wait for the UN, or not. Try conciliation first. Worry about how the non-Jewish world would react. The revisionists thought that if we didn't get it all of the Promised Land now, we would get nothing. The Left also wanted more. Most Haredim said

we should wait for the Messiah.

And they argued over the name. When I was a child, the organization in the UK raising money for Jewish settlement in the Holy Land was called the JPA. The Joint Palestine Appeal. Imagine if we had called our state Palestine, as indeed some wanted!! It would have solved a lot of problems now. Judea was an option. It was the last autonomous Jewish state. Others preferred Israel because its earlier incarnation involved more tribes, even if it was completely idolatrous. And Israel was the name given to Jacob and his descendants by God in the Bible. A few voted for Ivriya to break with the past.

Arieh Handler recalled:

“I received an invitation on that Friday morning, 14 May, by motorbike. It requested us not to divulge the contents and the locations. We were told to be in our seats that afternoon in “dark festive attire”. It was signed “the Secretariat”. I arrived at 3.30pm. At four o’clock on the dot, Ben-Gurion then stood up. We were all shaking. Without any introduction, no nice words, he read the declaration of independence. He asked the members of the council of the provisional government to come forth and sign it. No discussion, no dissent. One by one, they stood up. Then Hatikvah. We were out of the museum at ten to five. No one knew what was going to happen. We knew we had few arms. That the situation was extremely dangerous. I went home and then to Shul. When I returned, the Egyptian planes were already over Tel Aviv and dropping their bombs. This strange experience continued throughout the entire evening, up to midnight. On the one hand, people were singing and dancing and the other, north Tel Aviv was being bombed.”

Had it not been for the determination of Ben Gurion, and those who supported him, to ignore the outside world and to go it alone, we might not have had a State of Israel today.

Yom Yerushalayim 1967

This past week also marked the 51st anniversary of the battle for Jerusalem in the Six-Day War. On June 5, 1967, the government and the general staff were preoccupied with the Egyptian front. Hussein of Jordan had been asked not to get involved. He refused and attacked. The order from the general staff related only to the defense of Mt. Scopus and did not mention entering the Old City.

The reserve unit commanded by Motta Gur, which was supposed to parachute into Sinai, was sent to Jerusalem instead when heavy Jordanian shelling and the attack on the United Nations headquarters in southern Jerusalem shattered the illusion that the Jordanians were only offering token support to the invasion.

The leadership in Two Aviv was against going onto the offensive. They certainly did not want to upset the non-Jewish world over the Holy City. When faced with finding the way to the Old City of Jerusalem open, it was Motta Gur's decision to ignore external considerations. He and his troops wanted to capture the Old City. They took the decision. Once again individual initiative won the day.

Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov (1856-1918) was a Russian revolutionary and a Marxist theoretician. Speaking of the Russian Revolution he said, "The inevitable always comes about through the accidental." This applies to the establishment, expansion, and survival of Israel. I call it miraculous, others accidental or coincidental. Either way, the lesson is ignore one's enemies and "seize the day".

Israel's Declaration of Independence expressed wonderful, egalitarian, tolerant, honest, and compassionate sentiments, as with every declaration and constitution I know of, made by newly independent states—whether France, America, Russia, or any other. The practice never matches the theory. It is sad, but true. Israel is no different. And that makes marking the anniversary all the more worthwhile. We need to be reminded of the dreams of the founders and hope one day in the future to achieve them.

Shabbat Shalom and a very Happy Shavuot.