

A 'messy miracle': Israel at 60

Rabbi Barry M. Lutz, R.J.E.

Kol Nidre, 5768

Wildpeace

Yehudah Amichai

Read at the 1994 Oslo ceremony
awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to
Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Perez and Yassir Arafat

Not the peace of a cease-fire
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,
but rather
as in the heart when the excitement is over
and you can talk only about a great weariness.
I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult.
And my son plays with a toy gun that knows
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.
A peace
without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,
without words, without
the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be
light, floating, like lazy white foam.
A little rest for the wounds – who speaks of healing?
(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one
generation
to the next, as in a relay race:
the baton never falls.)

Let it come
like wildflowers,
suddenly, because the field
must have it: wildpeace.

Does anyone here remember the Israel Song Festival that took place on Israel Independence Day, May 15, 1967? On that day, celebrating the 20th birthday of Israel, Naomi Shemer introduced to the world the beautiful *Yerushalayim shel Zahav*, Jerusalem of Gold,. That same day, the Egyptian army began moving troops into the Sinai and massing near the Israeli border, intending that the 20th birthday would be the last. Two weeks later ... I celebrated

my tenth birthday. The next day began the Six Day War. It was an amazing time, almost messianic: the miraculous Israeli victory bringing to reality the hope of reunification of Jerusalem expressed in Shemer's song. Even as a ten year old I remember being so proud of Israeli strength and bravery. I seem to recall, however, that it didn't take long for mighty little David to become the great bully Goliath. How had that happened? And why was it that Israel seemed to be held to a higher standard than any other country? When I asked the question, the answer invariably was, "Would you want it any other way?" I couldn't argue with that. I didn't want it any other way. Even if that meant that she would be judged by different standards and held accountable for her actions in a different way.

Now, after forty years of wandering the wilderness in search of peace, the luster of that miraculous moment has long since faded. Israel continues to be surrounded by hostile enemies. Gratefully, in peace accords with Egypt and Jordan she has found some security. In place of nations, she is plagued by Hamas and Hezbollah. Beyond her borders better technology and more powerful weaponry means that those who wish to destroy her don't have to be standing so very close.

Even as the Gaza border town of Sderot, seemingly unnoticed, is bombed by Hamas almost daily, as Hezbollah is, more than likely, being resupplied by Ahmadinejad for its next confrontation in the north and his own country issues ominous warnings from the east, it is Israel amazingly enough that continues to be portrayed as the great monster, or at least as sidekick to the world's great monster.

And if relations with her neighbors were not already difficult enough, Israel's image has been further sullied in recent years by an infusion of European style anti-Semitism. Historically never a part of the Islamic world, anti-Semitism has geometrically increased fear and loathing of Israel and by extension Judaism in the Islamic world. During a recent celebration of Ramadan, a forty day period focusing particularly on spiritual renewal and togetherness, families gathered around their televisions, to watch a forty part mini-series broadcasting, in horrific detail everything from Jewish bloodletting for the making of Passover matzah to the secret meetings of Jewish leaders to take over the world. Unfortunately, for many, the events depicted in this obscene display have come to be accepted, if you will excuse the pun, as gospel.

Mainstream news agencies have also become unwitting partners in tarnishing Israel's image. (Let's give them the benefit of the doubt) As a kid I protested Israel being unfairly placed on a pedestal. A generation later, in their attempts to be impartial, the pedestal has been smashed to bits. It seems that many major news agencies want to make sure we understand that Israel is no better than anyone else, (and I think, want to make sure they are not accused of pandering to pro-Western or pro-Israeli interests). This summer's special: "God's Warriors" by CNN's Christiane Amanpour was just the latest example. Amanpour had to go a great distance in order to suggest moral equivalency

between small, radical Jewish, and for that matter, Christian, fundamentalist groups and Islamic fundamentalists. Jewish and Christian extremists, whose ugliness from time to time has horrified not only the world, but also the vast majority of their co-religionists, was compared to the day to day horrors wreaked by Islamic terrorists. I'm not sure how one, as a responsible journalist, legitimately compares admittedly horrific, but occasional acts of violence with the ongoing, carnage being inflicted by Islamic terrorists knowing full well that to the uninformed and uneducated eye there seems to be no difference.

Here we arrive at what is, I think a most substantial challenge facing Israel and us. My childhood was bracketed on one end by the Suez war in November of 1956 and on the other by the Entebbe rescue in 1976. I was born a decade after the establishment of the State of Israel. The Holocaust was still a very real and painful reality as I grew up. My teachers knew of a world where Israel was only a possibility. My childhood included the Yom Kippur War, the growing wave of P.L.O. terror led by Yasser Arafat, in addition to the Six Day war. Growing up Israel's survival was a matter of both great pride and genuine, ongoing concern. Its continued existence was certainly not a given.

In the last forty years, that has changed. In the summer of 1967 we were shocked and delighted by Israel's prowess. Last summer, we were equally shocked and disappointed by her ineptitude. Israel is no longer little David and too often depicted as Goliath. Israel is no longer seen as victim and too often as the aggressor. This is the Israel being portrayed to our world and to our children. The memories and moments which connected me, and many of us, to the miracle of a Jewish homeland do not exist for them. No memories of 1948, 1967 or 1973. No memory of the 1993 handshake of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn, or even of Rabin's assassination only 12 years ago.

"Why is Israel so important?" Sixty years ago, even forty years ago no one need ask. But today this is a real question – and not just by those outside the Jewish community. With the shadow of the Shoah quickly fading, with only distant memories of a world of anti-Semitic pogroms from which there was no avenue of escape, living here in a country of unprecedented freedom and acceptance, my fear is that it is becoming too easy to wonder about the need for a Jewish state; especially one that is portrayed as being at the root of so many of the world's problems. And so as we celebrate this year Israel's 60th birthday, it is a critical time for us, I think, as Jews and Americans to reacquaint ourselves with the purpose and significance of our Promised Land. Israel needs our strong advocacy and so here is what I believe we must do:

Advocacy begins with knowledge. We must understand the past, present and future significance of Israel for us. A great place to start is by seeking out those individuals who personally experienced a world before Israel. Here are our teachers. We must listen their stories and reflections about living in a world without a Jewish state; that we might come to understand what it would mean for us, (God forbid) to live in such a world again.

There is no better way to learn than to hear from those who have personal experience like these members of our community. And, no one has had a better seat in recent years than Ambassador Dennis Ross, who will join us here, on Saturday evening January 12. Ambassador Ross served for more than twelve years as the point man in the peace process for both the George H. W. Bush and Clinton administrations. Currently he is a counselor with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is a bright, articulate and engaging speaker who will add greatly to your knowledge and understanding of Israel and the Middle East. You must make it a point to be here that evening if you care at all about the future of Israel and the Middle East.

Keeping informed is critical and that means going beyond news broadcasts. The internet is a great place to start. Get an online subscription to two important organizations that issue daily internet reports offering valuable insight, perspective and balance on a wide variety of issues pertaining to the Middle East. The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, is a media watchdog that focuses on promoting accurate and balanced coverage of Israel and the Middle East. And, the Middle East Media Research Institute, which explores the Middle East through that region's media, providing translations of Arabic, Persian and Turkish media as well as important analysis. You can find links to both of these organizations and more on our Temple's website. Here you will come into contact with voices of fanaticism as well as voices of reason, voices of hate and voices calling for reconciliation. We must be educated about all these voices. It is critical we not assume, stereotype and close our ears and minds. There is a courageous and growing chorus of Muslim voices calling for enlightened thinking and moderation. They need our support.

As Jewish citizens of this country, it is incumbent upon us to make others understand why Israel is such a critical ally in the Middle East. There is currently only one true democracy there, only one place, in fact, where Muslims can raise their voice in peaceful protest against their government without fear of being tortured, terrorized or worse. And that place is not Iraq!

Finally to paraphrase our sages who said "If there is no sustenance there is no Torah." Israel requires of us more than study and prayer. We must offer sustenance! Buy Israel bonds. Purchase Israeli merchandise! Support local merchants who stock items from Israel. Whether on the internet or in your car get out there and shop.

The great 11th century Jewish poet, Yehudah Halevi wrote, "Would that I have wings that I could wend my way to Thee ... The air of your land is the very life of our soul." If only he had lived in our days. We do have wings and you have to use them. You need to visit. It's great for Israel and better for you. To walk the land is to reconnect with something powerful and indescribable at the very core of your soul. Those who make possible Birthright Israel, a free ten day trip for our young adults understand the power of the Land. In the last seven years over 145,000 young adults have experienced the power and passion of

Eretz Yisrael. Birthright is securing the Jewish future by connecting our kids to each other and to their Jewish homeland.

A year ago, with the same goal of connection, I initiated our own trip to Israel. After a 40 year journey in the wilderness of Northridge, I thought it was time for us to enter the Promised Land. The only way to truly grasp the complex spiritual, historical and political geography that Rabbi Levi Kelman, a leader of the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism calls a “messy miracle,” is to experience it first hand. I am delighted that this summer another 50 members of this community will join me there to joyously experience and celebrate 60 miraculous years.

On this day in 1973 the messianic hopes that had bubbled up following the Six Day War ran headlong into reality. For the individuals who experienced that day, Yom Kippur has taken on additional weight. For them today is more than one of personal reflection and atonement, it is also a day of national remembrance. Yom Kippur serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle in a land that exists somewhere between messianic hopes and those more practical hopes built by living day to day in a land of messy miracles.

As we celebrate this year Israel’s 60th birthday we pray that together as Yisrael, people and land, we will speedily and in our day, experience the true promise of a land flowing with milk and honey, the blessings of security and of peace.

Will you please join me in a prayer for Israel:

“We pray for the land of Israel and its people. May its borders know peace, its inhabitants tranquility. And may the bonds of faith and fate which unite the Jews of all lands be a source of strength to Israel and to us all. God of all lands and ages, answer our constant prayer with a Zion once more aglow with light for us and for all the world, and let us say: Amen.”

Gates of Repentance, p.219