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## ISRAEL AT FIFTY: THE MEANING OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

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**Israel in Historical Time and Space / Zionism, the Jewish People, and the Collapse of Communism / The Special Impact of the Collapse of Communism on European Jewry / Demographic Transformations and Organizational Consequences / Israel's Political Reality / Israelis Looking for Their Heritage / The Lessons of Israel as a New Society**

### Israel in Historical Time and Space

In the years immediately following World War II, during the second half of the decade of the 1940s, the world crossed the divide between the modern and postmodern epochs. Several events were major signposts marking that turning point, including the beginnings of the international monetary system and the establishment of the United Nations to begin the globalization that has become characteristic of the new epoch, the beginnings of the Cold War and a permanent American commitment to institutionalized world involvement through the establishment of NATO, and the first steps toward European Union, to name only a few of those signposts.

Future historians almost surely will conclude that the establishment of the State of Israel as the Jewish state at the crossroads of the Old World, just as the Mediterranean Basin was being restored to its central position in world affairs, stands out. So, too, 1800 years earlier, Bar Kochba's last stand

had been one of the signposts marking the climax of the Roman empire and the ancient pagan world, and the beginning of the rise of the synthesis between Roman and Christian imperialism, which in one form or another lasted until it was shattered in the late 1940s.

It may be that only a few of the Jews who had pioneered, fought for, or supported the establishment of the new state saw it in these world-historical terms. For the Jewish people it, more immediately personal, was a return to full participation in world affairs in a manner that would enable us to protect our own interests and make possible the survival and cultural renewal of our people. For us, that was enough in 1948, reeling as we still were from the impact of the Holocaust and the demise of Europe as the main center of Jewish life, which it had been for 1,000 years.

The world-historical character of the re-establishment of the Jewish state is better seen as we acquire more perspective. For example, fifty years

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later we now see that Zionism, combining as it has both national and moral stirrings, was the most successful of the twentieth century political ideologies, surviving Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, in turn. We celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Israel in the tenth year after the collapse of Soviet Communism and the "evil empire" that the Soviet Communists had established within and beyond Russia.

In 1948, a fortuitous tactical situation led the Soviet Union to join with the United States to support the establishment of Israel in a last cooperative act prior to the full eruption of the Cold War. This happened despite the fact that Zionism and Soviet Communism had been bitter enemies since the emergence of both and would again become bitter enemies after that brief moment of tactical alliance. How especially fitting, then, that the fifth decade of the state's existence has been marked by the mass exodus of Jews from the former Soviet Union, now in ruins, who after years of deprivation of their heritage have come in overwhelming numbers to the Zionist state, driven out by the failures of the Communist state.

### **Zionism, the Jewish People, and the Collapse of Communism**

The struggle between Zionism and Communism was one of the great ideological struggles of the twentieth century and one which has affected millions of Jews. Zionism was the one ideology that continued to challenge Communism within the Soviet empire itself throughout all the long years of its existence. The Communist leadership themselves understood this, and it explains much of their essentially pathological response to Israel as a Zionist state and to the Zionist aspirations of the Jewish People. Considering the war waged upon Zionism by the various totalitarian ideologies of this century, victory is particularly sweet. Beyond that, the collapse of Communism clearly has substantial implications for the Jewish people morally, ideologically, demographically, and institutionally.

Morally, the struggle between the totalitarian Communist world and the free world was at the center of the fight for liberty and democracy in which Jews have been both major actors and major victims. The collapse of Communism has not only socially and politically liberated the Jews of the Soviet empire, but has liberated many Jews from the moral-intellectual delusion of Marxism.

Of all the competing ideologies in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century, Zionism has turned out to be the strongest. It was part of the coalition that

vanquished Fascism and Nazism fifty years ago and then part of the coalition that vanquished Communism. No doubt this is because Zionism broadly unites within its framework the three most powerful human currents of our time: democracy, nationalism, and the search for religious meaning.

As a national movement committed to democratic self-government of the Jewish people and the Jewish state, in theory and practice, its roots lie deep in Jewish religious tradition. Zionism, often considered by "progressives" as parochial and reactionary, has instead turned out to be exactly on target for the collective human needs of at least one segment of humanity in our time. That wing of Zionism most influenced by Communism and the left in matters religious, which originally sought to follow the Marxist line into secularism, has lost its prominence among the Jewish people in Israel and the diaspora.

By the time of Communism's collapse at least half of the Jews in Israel were "Zionists of redemption" rather than "Zionists of revolution." That is to say, rather than seeing Zionism as a means of overthrowing traditional Judaism, as was the case among the Eastern European Zionist revolutionaries, their Zionism was a matter of fulfillment of that tradition. This is particularly true among the millions of Sephardic Jews in Israel. But it is also true of almost all Jews who did not embrace a Marxist or quasi-Marxist understanding of Zionism. Indeed, in recent years Zionism has been at its weakest when challenged by Jewish religious fundamentalism, which seems to have acquired much of the extra energy that made Zionism the leading movement in Jewish life a generation or two ago.

### **The Special Impact of the Collapse of Communism on European Jewry**

Demographically, the impact of effectively doubling (and perhaps more than that) the Jewish population of Europe by the release of the captive Jews of the Soviet empire is having major implications for Jewish life. Even after the mass emigration of Jews from the ex-Soviet republics runs its course, there should still be as many Jews in those republics as there are in all the rest of Europe combined. What European Jewry will make of this is not yet clear, but it surely is having a transformatory effect.

Even before the collapse of Communism, Western European Jewry constituted what could have been a powerful bloc of some 1,200,000 Jews, but the inability of Jews of different countries to come together for more than consultative purposes and the lingering sense of

impoverishment, material and spiritual, even among the Jews in free Europe, prevented them from taking their proper place on the world Jewish scene. One of the things the collapse of Communism has brought has been an astounding revitalization of Jewish life in the ex-Soviet empire with the corresponding release of Jewish energy. As those Jews come together with the other Jews of Europe, which they are, who sooner or later will have to come to grips with the new European unity being fostered by the European Union and the all-European institutions, European Jewry will emerge, perhaps three million strong, to become the third largest concentration of Jews in the world after Israel and the United States, and not far behind the first two.

The reemergence of Jewish life in the ex-Communist bloc also sharpens the question of "Who is a Jew." Because of the confused situation of Jews in those countries for so long a period of time, many of those who most actively identify with the Jewish people in those countries would not be considered *halakhically* Jewish. This issue, which began to be felt in the United States as a result of the rapid growth of the Jewish intermarriage rate in that country, which could be ignored for years in the Communist bloc because of the inaccessibility of the Jews there, has now become a world-wide problem — both in those newly-reorganized Jewish communities of the ex-Communist states and also in Israel as a result of the mass aliyah of Jews from those states — one that organized Jewry can no longer ignore.

Numbers alone are not enough, however. There must be appropriate institutional frameworks through which European Jewry, including the Jews of the former Communist countries, can participate in world Jewish affairs. In the last three years we have witnessed the Jewish genius for self-organization at work in the ex-Communist countries, especially, but not exclusively, in the ex-Soviet republics, where there has been an explosion of organized Jewish life seemingly out of nowhere. Jews totally repressed as a community for two generations or more have taken matters into their own hands and organized themselves locally and country-wide in *kehillot* and confederations of *kehillot*. They have developed institutions representing all the major domains of Jewish life. If this energy continues to be mobilized through these and similar institutions, then the European Jewish presence will be felt in every arena of Jewish life.

Moreover, European Jewry is ceasing to be a mere appendage of Israel institutionally and in its ideas. Increasingly, European Jews are asserting themselves

even in ways that go counter to Israeli stands. They are acting less like Israelis in exile and more like people in Europe to stay. This will have consequences for Israel and Israel-diaspora relations.

### Demographic Transformations and Organizational Consequences

The decades of the immediate future are likely to see a transformation of the Jewish world because of the demographics of assimilation and intermarriage in the diaspora, including the American Jewish community. In fifty years the population of the state has grown ten-fold from 600,000 to 6,000,000, 80 percent of whom are Jewish. It is now the second largest concentration of Jews in the world and is rapidly on its way to become the largest. It may even come to contain a majority of world Jewry in another generation or two. This means that world Jewry will be reshaped in one way or another by a majority of Jews living independently in their own land (or at least as independently as possible in a globalized world where state sovereignty is being reduced). Israel will clearly be seen as the one place where it is possible to maintain a full Jewish life no matter what one's level of religious observance.

At the same time, the bi-polar domination of the Jewish world by Israel and American Jewry will be replaced by a world in which American Jewry will have to share its diaspora leadership with a newly-revived European Jewry, once the latter begins to form meaningful common institutions. At the very least, there will be a triangular instead of bi-polar relationship. And once there are three nodes, even smaller concentrations of Jews, such as the half million in Latin America and the smaller but active concentrations in South Africa and Australia, will find it easier to play significant roles in the world Jewish polity.

The institutions of world Jewry, which have been moving in the direction of an organized polity at least through a network of single and multi-purpose authorities dominated by the government of Israel, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the World Zionist Organization, the World Jewish Congress, and the Joint Distribution Committee, shadowed by the world synagogue and other religious movements, will take on greater clarity and coherence. This will become easier with the end of the bi-polar relationship and its constraints. This will be especially true if Israel can be at peace in a world in which globalization in economics and communications seems to be developing ever stronger transnational linkages, turning its competitive drives in the direction of commercial competition rather than armed

conflict.

Does all this seem too good to be true? Perhaps. In taking an optimistic view of the impact of the collapse of Communism, we dare not forget the negative demographic situation of the Jewish people, which is likely to grow worse as the world becomes more and more of an open society in which hedonistic individualism is the dominant belief system and the notion that human freedom means freedom from all obligation and restraint spreads. We must also consider the reality that Israel is located in the only part of the world that is not trying to go along with these new trends and whose response to the demise of Communism is limited by the prevalence of a craziness of its own.

Nor can we ignore the perennial crises within Israel which are only partly manifested by the struggle between traditional Judaism and those Jews who see themselves as secular. That is part of the larger struggle between those Israeli Jews who want Israel to be an unmodified part and parcel of secular Western civilization as it now exists and those, whether religious in the traditional sense or not, who see a special value in the preservation of the Jewish heritage as the basis for the Jewish state. That is the true conflict in both Israel and the diaspora, one that has been obscured by petty, albeit serious, squabbles between the various "ultras."

### Israel's Political Reality

In the biblical understanding of time, epochs are renewed every tenth generation (between 280 and 320 years). So it was with the modern epoch which covered nine generations from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and which came to an end in the tenth. We still are very near the beginning of the postmodern epoch — in its second generation — and we are still feeling our way toward understanding the new epoch's character, meaning, and problems. I would hazard a prediction that the State of Israel will play a very prominent, some might even say disproportionate, role in shaping the new epoch, not only for Jews but for the world.

The great change wrought by the establishment and growth of Israel is that after thousands of years the Jewish people must shape its own public space once again. In the short term, most of us become aggravated by the issues which that highlights, most particularly, the struggle between ultra-Orthodox and secular Jews and the various gradations in between, and the problems attendant on whether Israel will be a Jewish state or merely be a state of the Jewish people. Jews from that

other great concentration, the United States, often view these conflicts as illegitimate, improper for a democracy. The truth is that if we Jews are a people, and that hardly can be denied, we are obliged to shape our own public space and to work out these conflicts, dilemmas, and contradictions through the politics which inevitably will surface in that public space because of who we are, and must be grateful that we now have an opportunity to do so.

Bismarck was not wrong when he said that politics is like sausage, it is best not to see how it is made. But in a democratic age we cannot help but see how the sausage of politics is made. At the same time, we are still learning that, with all its problematics, politics is one of the glories of humanity since it allows humans to organize and shape their lives together and to handle their conflicts without bloodshed, while also helping them realistically define justice or the higher ends of their social and spiritual existence in this world within the limits and realities of human capacity.

One of the most significant dimensions of Israel's re-establishment is the fact that it is Jewish and democratic. Indeed, I would argue that it is democratic because it is Jewish. There is no other way to account for the fact that a population stemming overwhelmingly from countries and regions where democracy never existed should establish an unequivocally democratic polity (warts and all). This can only be explained by their continued attachment to the Jewish political tradition which always has been republican in the classic sense of seeing the polity as a *res publica*, a public thing, led in human affairs by representatives of the people, even if not a democracy as moderns understand the term.

### Israelis Looking for Their Heritage

For the past year or two we have seen many signs that non-religious Israelis are trying to reconnect with Jewish tradition in ways that will give them a usable heritage from their point of view. This is a laudable aim after such a long period in which the mainstream Israeli elites, including most of those in positions of responsibility, have been busily engaged in throwing out the baby with the bath; that is to say, their rejection of Jewish religious belief and observance led them to reject anything and everything that smacked of being derived from the Jewish religious heritage. As people have learned in older and perhaps wiser societies than that of the new Israel, no people can live without a heritage of its own. Wholesale rejection by people of their heritage is a form of cultural suicide. It is perfect-

ly reasonable for different groups in a society to approach their common heritage in different ways, but to ignore or even reject that heritage is simply not comprehensible. An increasing number of non-religious Israelis have begun to concern themselves with what constitutes the Jewish heritage and how it might speak to them in their circumstances, a search being increasingly manifested in study and discussion of classic Jewish materials.

One of the most useful bodies of material available to Israelis in this connection is the Jewish political tradition. This tradition dates back to biblical times and has had its manifestations throughout all of subsequent Jewish history when the Jewish people were in their land and when they were in exile. Before the rise of Zionism, the political tradition was intertwined with the Jewish religious tradition in most ways.

From our contemporary vantage point, it is possible to view it as a separable tradition, resting, to be sure, on Jewish norms derived from or best expressed by Jewish religion, those that in any case are part of the usable heritage that people are seeking. The specifically political elements in the tradition can be understood in light of those norms. They can be useful not only for understanding how Jews lived and survived in past generations, but can be used to at least give us ideas as to how Jews might be able to live and even live better under the contemporary circumstances of Jewish political life.

Obviously, the Jewish political tradition has to address the perennial Israeli question about the relationship of Judaism and democracy. It not only reveals but explains where Judaism reinforces democratic behavior and practices, and where it stands against at least the current understanding of democracy, and why. But the tradition also asks and answers other questions.

Why is it that Jews have been so good at self-organization since the reconstitution of the Jewish slaves at the Exodus as a self-governing people in earliest times, the subsequent reconstitution of the Jews as a people in exile in Babylonia after the destruction of the Second Temple, down to the amazing reemergence of organized Jewish life in the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the Communist dictatorship? At the same time, the tradition can lead us to look for answers as to why, with that excellent record in the realm of self-organization, Jews have so often failed when it comes to statesmanship, and whether there is anything that we can do about it, either from within the tradition or by going outside of it. We can learn from examining why the Second Commonwealth was successfully

organized by the Hasmoneans in the face of the powerful Hellenistic empire and how the descendants of those same Hasmoneans delivered it into the hands of Rome by lacking the statesmanship to foresee that their internal quarrels would bring disaster to all Jews through the Roman conquest.

Thus, the Jewish political tradition should help us ask the hard questions which we in Israel and the Jewish world as a whole must face if we are to navigate these perilous times. It also establishes a basis for critiquing our state and its regime. Moreover, the Jewish political tradition is open to all Jews regardless of their religious attitudes, beliefs, or behavior, and can be profitably learned by all for what it can teach us about living in the world of public affairs, a world which can never be avoided.

### The Lessons of Israel as a New Society

As one of the modern world's new societies, Israel was naturally attracted to the world's other new societies. They, indeed, have turned out to be Israel's best friends in today's world, led by the United States, the greatest of them all. It should be recalled that Israel is the only modern new society founded by people not from the British Isles or Scandinavia. As such it has another historic role to play, enhanced by the fact that the Jewish people was the first new society of record back in biblical times. As such, Israel is not only an example of a modern new society but of the possibilities given to a new society to repeatedly renew itself over the centuries and millennia.

I began this essay with the world-historical importance of Israel because we Jews have a tendency to see our situation only through our own immediate needs and it is important for us to remind ourselves of Israel's larger significance, because all these years of statehood, especially under the conditions of isolation that Israel has had to face, have led Israeli Jews to turn inward and to become even more particularistic than we might otherwise have been.

The Jewish people, like all peoples, has both universalistic and particularistic tendencies, but we have difficulty balancing them. Israel, which started out with universalistic as well as particularistic dreams, has become more particularistic because of its situation. (The other major Jewish community in the world in the United States has moved in the other direction because of its situation.) Establishing the appropriate balance is vitally important for Israel and the Jewish people.

Looking at matters more particularistically, Israel and Zionism together have transformed the Jewish

world and all its parts. One cannot think of any aspect of Jewish life that has not been touched and changed directly or indirectly, for good or for ill, by the combination of both. Nor should we be surprised that nothing has so impacted on Jews as the rise of the Third Commonwealth since the fall of the Second, this despite all the great, moving, and traumatic events through which we Jews have passed in the intervening years.

If the State of Israel is the contemporary Jewish ticket into the world, the Land of Israel offers a paradigm for what the Jewish people always has been and must remain. Located at the crossroads of the Old World in the area where three continents meet, the Land of Israel historically has been open to or connected with all of the important cultures and states that humankind has known. At the same time, with the exception of a narrow band of its territory along the Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts, the land's drainage system leads its waters to flow into the Dead Sea; that is to say, into a body of water that is particularistic and blocked off from the great bodies of water of the world

which touch on Israel's peripheries. Thus, while the Eurasian continental divide separating the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and its Mediterranean extension from those of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and their Red Sea extension runs down the heart of the country, through Jerusalem, Israel's waters themselves remain self-contained.

I would submit this is the historic reality of the Jewish people — participants in every aspect of world affairs yet somehow self-contained in their own religion and peoplehood. The re-establishment of the State of Israel has restored the connection between these geographic and cultural realities. One can only believe that such a restoration is a necessary part of the unfolding of human history. It remains Israel's challenge to make something of it.

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