

# Connections

## We Were Like Dreamers

Recently a series of posters and bumper stickers announced "Israel is real." For admirers of Israel, for those who marvel at its rapid development, its scientific and cultural achievement, its military prowess—for the Jews who now live with dignity in their own homeland—Israel is quite real. For its enemies, for those who see Israel as a militaristic, imperialistic theocracy, for those who have suffered dislocation, there are too many painful reminders of Israel's existence. It is not the reality of Israel but its legitimacy which is being contested.

Twenty-five years after the establishment of the state it would seem that this reminder of Israel's existence is gratuitous. However, the full implications of a sovereign Jewish state may still be elusive to world Jewry and to those who try to understand Jewish reactions since 1948. In considering this period in Jewish history the words of the Psalmist resound for me with particular meaning: "When the Lord returned the exiles of Zion, we were like dreamers." There is something frightening about the prospect of being caught up in dreams with a dulled sense of reality when the fate of exile and dispersion is coming to an end for many Jews. It could well take another quarter century for us fully to comprehend this monumental event and its larger impact on the Jewish people.

What is most obviously a novum for the Jewish people relates to the political success of Zionism. In the peculiar forms that meetings of nation-states take, the Jews are now a nation among the nations. In many periods of Jewish history were characterized by subjugation to the arbitrariness of rulers, and if recent years in particular witnessed the erosion of communal autonomy, the Jews who reside in Israel now have the opportunity to define a broad range of their interests and implement appropriate policies internally. Internationally they can establish a modicum of influence. In the responsibility that Israel takes for Jews abroad it gives Jewish interests the world over direct access to the international political arena. This is important symbolically as well as instrumentally.

Great pleasure is derived from negotiations with world leaders by the prime minister of a Jewish state. Such tête-à-têtes were forecast for the days of the Messiah. The Court Jews, the backroom negotiations, are still an important part of Jewish politics, but formally the collective interests of Jews as Jews are negotiated on the highest level of state. No less messianic is a meeting between a Jewish head of state and the head of the Catholic Church. Jewish messianic claimants often had fantasies of such meetings in Rome as part of their redemption program. One

must marvel at the Pope's radical break with the tradition of the Church in reassessing Jewish history and crediting the Jews with being a compassionate people, even if this was by way of criticizing the policies of the current government of Israel. Sticking to the messianic script, Mrs. Meir reminds the Pope of the more unpleasant dimensions of traditional Jewish-Christian relations. In good diplomatic form, however, she softens the tone of her accusation by reminiscing over pogroms which took place under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Church, for which Catholicism can hardly be held accountable. The traditional messianic drama is being staged, albeit in modern costume.

No messianic drama—traditional or modern—can be staged without its central actor: God. Here too, in the relationship of Jews with God, a significant change has taken place. One of the works of the Zionist-inspired renaissance of Hebrew letters is the epic poem of Isaac Lamdan, *Masada*. The mountain fortress overlooking the Dead Sea, where one of the last battles in the rebellion against the Romans was fought in the first century, becomes a symbol of national revival. The son asserts that the heroic self-assertion of rebuilding Masada and the inspiration of the prophets that roam between its walls are the only hope for the Jewish people. The father, tattered from the most recent pogrom, rejects this plan, stubbornly clinging to the dusty doorpost with its Mezuzah, the encased biblical parchment that symbolizes God's watchfulness over His people.

The shift in orientation which accompanied the growth of Zionism is adumbrated in this intergenerational dialogue. Zionism favors collective action to individual piety. The early Zionists rebel against the Guardian of Israel, who, they find, often does not do such a good job of guarding. In the fulfillment of their Promethean task of going up to Masada they defy or ignore Him. When He reemerges it is as a victorious God at the head of the Israel Defense Forces, who is institutionalized in the Civil Religion. This "storming of heaven" is still ritualized in contemporary Israel. On certain occasions torchlight processions march to the top of Masada, where the appropriate portions of Josephus are read. The ceremonies conclude with the stirring and defiant vow, "Masada Again Will Not Fall."

Nevertheless, there is no full agreement among Jews on the extent or on the meaning of these changes in the relations between the Jews and the nations and between the Jews and God. This itself points to a third change which ultimately may be most important. A new schism has developed within the Jewish community. The polemic that has taken place for nearly two millennia between Jew and Christian is now taking place between Jew and Jew. The Zionists, who might be considered the New Christians in this polemic, can favorably measure their accomplishments against a wide variety of

biblical prophecies on the messianic age. They have explanations for their shortcomings as well. Their opponents firmly assert that present-day Israel and current events globally hardly illustrate that redemption has taken place.

As is often the case with schisms, strange bedfellows are brought together. The most vehement opponents of endowing Israel with messianic attributes are the ultrareligious and the ultraleftists. The former oppose hastening the redemption, which they consider a cosmological event attended to by God in His good time. It is the most audacious heresy to think that God would use irreligious politicians as the agents of His redemption. Leftist anti-Zionist Jews see the Zionist vision as too narrow and parochial. They see the energy invested in Israel as a deflection from the larger and more important cause.

Between the ideologically Zionist and ideologically anti-Zionist groups a large number of Jews find themselves trying to get their moorings straight after the events of recent Jewish history and to read the signs of the time properly. This group, with which I would identify, knows that it lives between a muted Revelation and an incipient Redemption. It faces a serious dilemma. On the one hand, there is the risk of being a Grand Inquisitor rejecting an existing situation laden with redemptive possibilities in order to maintain cherished fantasies in an unadulterated form. On the other hand, there is resistance against trimming the rich messianic expectations for a redeemed world to fit the contours of contemporary Israel.

Salo Baron, the most distinguished Jewish historian of our times, opens his magnum opus, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, with the following statement: "That there is no direct correlation between the fate of Jews and that of Judaism has often been observed." This, he goes on to explain, is particularly true in the post-Emancipation period, when developments that were advantageous for individual Jews proved to be detrimental to the collective existence of Jews and for Judaism.

The promise of Zionism was that it proposed to solve the problems of Jews and Judaism. It must therefore be evaluated in terms of the goals that it set forth for itself. And if Zionism is to continue drawing upon traditional messianism, it will have to relate itself to the messianic goals of material as well as spiritual redemption. Just as messianism that claimed to be "not of this earth" could not enlist full Jewish support, so messianism that claims to be *only* of this earth will leave some Jews uncommitted. If prophets will not be dedicated to the service of the rebuilt Masada, they will go elsewhere.

The next twenty-five years must bring to Zion and to the Jewish people dreamers of a different sort. Our dreaming should not dull our sense of what has taken place, but heighten our sense of a truer reality for which to strive. The defiance of God and nature which was an integral part of early Zionism must be

redirected against the limitations of social structure. Where heroism was once a supreme value imagination must now prevail.

It will take imagination to create a society in which incommensurable values will find some resolution. Just as Zionism has accepted the challenge to rehabilitate shattered lives and develop a desolate land so must it now create the structures in which more equitable distribution of resources will not curtail individual freedom and incentive, in which collective spirit will not lead to chauvinism, in which a flourishing Jewish culture will not limit universalistic, humanistic values.

High on the agenda for the next twenty-five years should be a reconsideration of relations with Jews of the diaspora. As the modal experiences of Jewish communities become more divergent there will be less opportunity to establish consensus. It may not always be the case that what is good for the Jews of Israel is good for world Jewry. The moment is too important in Jewish history not to engage fully the energies of world Jewry. What we do not need are dreamers who allow such rare opportunities to slip by.

Zionism is currently at the point where many revolutions flounder. The moral concern it evoked, the institutions it created, must be adjusted to cope with ongoing life rather than ongoing crises. If Masada will not again fall, neither will its legend. There are tragic moments in history when last stands are necessary, when life must be sacrificed for freedom, when heaven must be stormed. Now is the time to build the heavenly city on earth, to create a just society, to work for peace with neighbors, to enrich the quality of life for individuals.

On another mountain in Israel a great university library and medical school stand. For nineteen years these buildings were empty and unusable because of the ongoing conflict of Jews and Arabs. As a volunteer in Israel during the 1967 war I was in the first group of civilians to go up to Mount Scopus and begin the restoration work. It was our task to go through the chemistry laboratories and remove chemicals which might have become volatile over the years. Dressed in asbestos suits, we moved from laboratory to laboratory, seeing the senseless disintegration into which these facilities had fallen—facilities which could have brought benefit to all the people of the region. When we came into one laboratory, the professor who was supervising this operation became particularly agitated. Here, he said, he had been a student until 1948. During the war he and several colleagues held out during the siege against the Arab legions. On the wall was still visible the message that his dying friend had written in his own blood: "*Al tityaesh.*" Do not despair.

There are times when despair can be avoided only at a great price. The Jewish people knows this too well. Now more than heroism and sacrifice is needed.

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