

# Chairman's Message



*By Gerald M. Schreck*

A little over sixty years ago, more than six million of our people perished during the Holocaust. Many of the survivors, broken in body but extraordinarily resilient in spirit, went on to build the Jewish homeland. As some of the writers in this issue's symposium on Israel marvel: Sixty years ago, who would have thought that one day we Jews would have our own state? God indeed rained down an abundance of blessings upon us when He brought us back to our ancient homeland.

But the heady euphoria of the early years has passed. Today, despite Israel's remarkable success in so many areas, there is a painful lack of purpose and direction. Many Israelis are weary of war and of living with terror, disillusioned with their government and tragically estranged from Judaism ... even from Zionism.

In this special anniversary issue, a diverse group of writers and thinkers poses some disturbing existential questions about Israel's future—where, they ask, is Israel headed?


And yet, as all of our writers attest, there is cause for hope and even optimism. On a recent Orthodox Union mission to Israel, I got to see a

side of Israel that few get to see. Despite the cynicism and lack of idealism among Israeli youth, or maybe because of it, more and more young Israelis are finding meaning in Torah-true Judaism. Indeed, a recent survey by the Israel Democracy Institute found that 39 percent of Jewish Israelis under the age of forty consider themselves religious. Nowhere is this statistic more evident than in the plethora of phenomenally successful outreach programs run by the Seymour J. Abrams OU Jerusalem World Center. During my trip, I visited the OU's Makom BaLev Youth Centers in both Acco and Sderot, towns where the youth are especially at risk of succumbing to the perils of the street. In both of these places, I saw dozens of secular kids not only playing pool but also learning Jewish texts and joyously singing Jewish songs. Makom BaLev—the NCSY of Israel—reaches an astounding 1,500 kids in fifteen Israeli cities. True, Israel may have some grave issues to contend with in the years ahead, but to me, the country's future is as bright and as promising as the young people's faces I saw.

Incidentally, I would like to encourage every one of you to take the opportunity to join an OU mission to Israel. Each mission, which includes tours of restricted military sites as well

as private meetings with high-ranking Israeli political and military officials, gives one an insider's view of Israel. On this particular trip, we were privileged to meet with prominent officials including Ben Zion Gruber, a colonel in the reserves who is on active duty every weekend. Colonel Gruber amazed us as he demonstrated some of the IDF's sophisticated technology used to target would-be murderers.

In this jam-packed issue, we also focus on health, with tips on how to avoid the Pesach pounds and a sobering article on pediatric obesity in the Orthodox community, which pediatrician Ronald Nagel describes as “an epidemic.” The issue also includes a stirring essay describing the plight of non-halachic Jews, that is, the children and grandchildren of “illegitimate” converts. Written anonymously, the poignant essay raises difficult questions about the future of American Jews. Finally, returning to the Pesach spirit, journalist Steve Lipman, who has led many *Sedarim* for estranged Jews in Eastern Europe, offers pointers on how to lead a Seder for the Jewishly unknowledgeable—without having them fall asleep on you!

I hope you find this issue as thoughtful and as insightful as I do. As always, feel free to e-mail me your thoughts and comments at [ja@ou.org](mailto:ja@ou.org). 

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