



Twenty years ago, *Jewish Action* devoted the better part of an issue to analyzing “Israel at Forty.” At the time, the mood was cautiously optimistic and there was a strong sense of Jewish unity.

Unfortunately, in Israel today the scene is quite different. One sees much conflict and confusion; there seems to be a pervasive sense of ambivalence and a distinct lack of confidence, direction and leadership. On the other hand, outreach efforts have borne fruit and a not-insubstantial segment of secular Israeli youth is reaching out, wishing to be connected to the Jewish past and future. In fact, in some Israeli public high schools, secular students are requesting time to pray during school hours. It would seem that at this juncture in history, Israelis are in need of determining who they are, where they are and where they need to be.

In the pages ahead, a diverse group of thinkers and writers reflects on these very questions and provides some sobering—yet hopeful—thoughts about the situation in Israel today.





A Love Story in Anticipation of a Happy Ending

By Hillel Fendel

A young concentration camp survivor, one of the thousands who immigrated to Palestine after the Holocaust, picks oranges. Photo courtesy of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC).

“Skittering over the hilltops, jumping between the mountains” (Song of Songs 2:8). In sight for a moment, out of view for two, and once again back into range. How aptly the relationship depicted in Song of Songs between God and Israel describes that between the Jewish people of today—so clearly longing for Redemption and for Israel’s material and spiritual success—and the modern State of Israel.

We see so much good and beauty in Israel as it skitters before us over the hilltops—and then we recall its many shortcomings and problems as its glory falls out of view behind the mountains. True, we know it will soon come into view again—and maybe this time even forever! But when we look at the horizon and see nothing but the fleeting image of what could be, it is hard to remain encouraged. Perhaps all that’s missing is the ability to view the mountainside from the proper angle?

Some decades ago, when I first arrived in Bayit Vegan, a neighborhood in Jerusalem, for high school it seemed as if all was right with the country. A sense of confidence prevailed: The Kotel was ours, and work was underway to build a plaza in front of it. The War of Attrition was behind us, and whatever terror attacks there were—and there were—were faced with unity and a sense of justice in our national cause. The *ba’al teshuvah* movement was going strong, and new *yeshivot* seemed to be opening everywhere (though at a snail’s pace compared to the current frenzied rate). The ingathering of the exiles was proceeding apace, and the economy was growing. While it was difficult to get a phone line for a private apartment, the number of months one needed to wait seemed to be gradually dropping to single digits.

And now, several months before Israel’s sixtieth birthday, has everything turned upside down? Must we feel, as the introduction to this series of articles implies, that all of our accomplishments amount to nil? Must we feel that *then* we had a sense of unity, but today we don’t; that *then* we had confidence and direction, but today we don’t? Yes, we all know the many terrific problems we currently face, but must we assume that our national history has gone into reverse?

Am Yisrael is always advancing along the road toward Redemption, and especially so during the past 120 years. For more than 1,800 years we had been waiting patiently for the Divine call “Return, My children, to your borders!” It finally unmistakably, came in the late 1800s, when Jews not only began arriving in the Land of Israel in large numbers, but were also self-supporting!

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As the great visionary Rabbi Shmuel Mohilever wrote in 1890 after a visit to the Land:

Can anyone not see the finger of God in all that has befallen us? ... It has been now six years that towns and villages and wells and flocks have arisen from the dust; the fields are full of grain, and grapes and vines cover the hills. Fourteen colonies have been founded during this period, and 3,000 of our brothers are working there. Before, the holy ways were filled with thorns and



Jerusalem Commander Uzi Narkism, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and IDF Chief of Staff Yitzchak Rabin enter the Old City of Jerusalem through the Lion’s Gate on June 7, 1967.

Photo: Ilan Bruner, Israel Government Press Office

thistles, and people could barely walk here and traveled only by covered wagon—but now, we travel from Yaffo to Jerusalem, Hebron, Petach Tikvah, Rishon LeTzion, Mikveh Yisrael, Zichron Yaakov—and all on a straight path, the “king’s way,” in a carriage drawn by three horses. And Jerusalem, so desolate before, is now as fresh as in its youth; outside the walls of old Jerusalem, we see straight and beautiful streets lined by hundreds of houses, soon to be thousands; and all the European countries are trying to buy a portion of the Holy Land and Jerusalem. Is all this not a sign and wonder that Hashem has remembered His

people and His Land, and that all that He wrought was for our good, to bring us up to the heights of Mt. Zion?

Over a century later, can there be any doubt that the process of Redemption has only intensified? When commemorating sixty years of statehood, we must not look myopically at the past few years, but rather at the entire picture—beginning with the Exile, and extending through the centuries of darkness, wandering and persecutions to the gradual return of the Jewish people to their home—exactly as was predicted by our prophets and sages.

Though for many years it was hard to see how this process was developing, in our generation we are fully confident that our ascent towards complete national Redemption has started—and that we ourselves are playing an active role in moving the process along. As Rabbi Eli Sadan, the head of the first *mechinah* (pre-army yeshivah program) in Israel, wrote in a recent pamphlet:

The front line of great rabbis of the past generations—Rabbi Yosef Karo, the

Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalischer, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook and many others—told us: “Holy flock, the time of your redemption has arrived!” They marked the way for us—yet astonishingly, it was very hard for the Jewish people to accept the ruling [that the period of forced exile was ending and the time to return to the Land of Israel had come]. This was chiefly because it was truly a hard thing to do—to adopt a national lifestyle of politics, army, economy, and the like, and all in the old/new garb of the traditional sanctity and purity of Israel. How difficult! But “kol dodi dofek, my beloved is calling,” and “et l’chenenah ki va moed, the time has come to favor the Land”; the nation, in the depths of its soul, began to awaken; the Master of the Universe dropped the walls and opened before us the gates of Eretz Yisrael... The time had come.

Even if the religious public hesitated, Rabbi Sadan continued, the non-religious Jews were unable to wait any longer. Creating facts on the ground, they burst forward. Tradition states that



the coming of the Mashiach will take place in a similar manner—*Mashiach “Ben Partzi”* is destined to come from Peretz, the one who *paratz*, burst forth, into the world before his twin brother.

Ever since those early years of modern Zionism, Israel has continued to be on the ascendancy, with more Torah, more religiosity, more hi-tech and scientific inventions, more production of agriculture, more development of cities and towns—and more growth in the Jewish population.

Israeli soldiers weep at the Western Wall after gaining control of the Old City of Jerusalem during the 1967 Six-Day War. During his tenure as Israeli prime minister, Yitzchak Rabin described that day. “[They] reached the stones of the Western Wall, feeling the emotion of the place; there never was, and never will be, another moment like it. Nobody staged that moment. Nobody planned it in advance. Nobody prepared it and nobody was prepared for it; it was as if Providence had directed the whole thing.”

Photo: Dan Porges, Israel Government Press Office





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Everyone is familiar with the fantastic rate of growth and construction in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. But what about the rest of the country? Take, for example, sleepy old Afula. When I lived there some twenty years ago, I would take my bicycle for weekly rounds around the outskirts of the city to check that the eruv was functional. Today, given Afula's tremendous growth, the former "outskirts" are in the middle of town, while the current outskirts are blocks and blocks away in each direction.

Could any Jew who experienced the Holocaust sixty-five years ago have dared to entertain such a scenario? Never in the last 1,930 years have the Jewish people, on a national scale, had it so good!

But, of course, there is the other side of the coin. If everything is so great, why does everything feel so bad? The problems in Israel are many and great (a partial list): Corruption in the government, poor quality of education,

discord about our national goals, a growing non-Jewish population, growing socio-economic gaps, increased estrangement from Judaism and the Land of Israel, lack of inspired leadership, apathy regarding the fate of Jerusalem, uncertainty regarding the nation's future and violent crime.

So what do we do? Give up? Throw in the towel? Say it was a good try but better luck next time, see you again in a couple of centuries? The very fact that we can entertain this question is an absurdity. Can you imagine the French or the Brazilians ever "giving up" and leaving their country? Is there any nation that would actually consider the option of calling for a "do-over"?

Moreover, it's an incredible *chutzpah* when Jews living *chutz la'Aretz* criticize Israelis and their political leaders and assert that because of their mistakes, they will be staying in the Diaspora. Such sentiments are often found in talkbacks to Internet news reports on Israel.

History has decreed that our prophets' Divine messages are coming true before our eyes; we can either jump on the bandwagon or get left behind. But to claim membership in a nation that has taken the path of revival while at the same time choosing to remain exiled is untenable in the long run.

This, then, is both the challenge and the solution: *aliyah*. It's not just for those who live outside Israel (immigration) but also for those who already live here. The word *aliyah* comes from the root word *aleh*, which either means to "go up" or to "raise up." Those who live here should be continually trying to raise the quality of Israeli life on all planes. *Aliyah* to Eretz Yisrael is necessary, for the sake of both the individual and the nation. We need Jews here, and they need to be here. The Jewish nation suffers when her children are not home, and the children suffer when they are cut off from their source.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the more people move to Israel in order

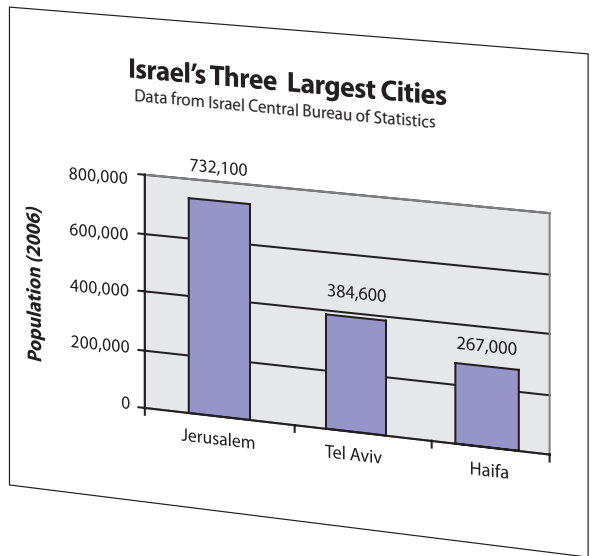
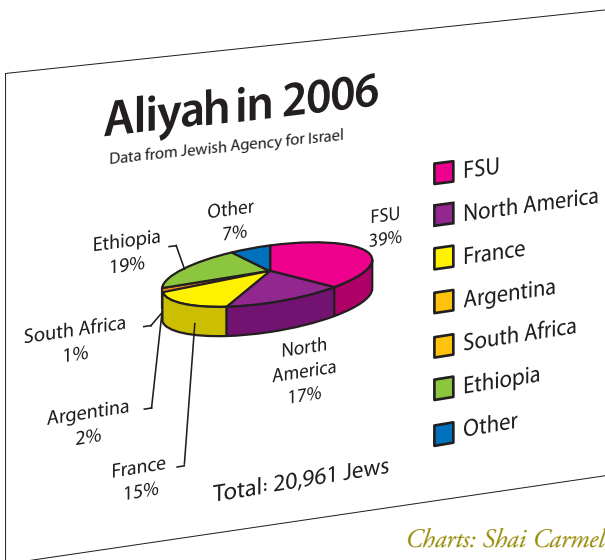
to help solve our collective problems, the faster those problems will be solved. Decades ago, some religious leaders did not encourage *aliyah* for fear that the State would not be religious. Ironically, this almost guaranteed that the State would be irreligious.

There are those today who mock the religious leaders of previous decades for taking this road, yet they themselves take a similar approach today. However, there's a difference. Back then, it was "spiritual" problems that kept some Jews away. Today, it is "political" problems. "First get rid of your government," they say, or "your bureaucracy or [fill in the blank] and then I'll consider coming." (Insert small dose of healthy skepticism here.)

Let us not make the same errors again. No more "I-told-you-so's" after the fact. Instead of once again finding the perfect excuse to remain in the Diaspora, let us jump into the fray with real-time fixes. Let us be a part of the solution, not the problem.

And, as I stated earlier, those who live here in Israel must also make *aliyah*. We must be constantly on the lookout, as more and more people already are, for ways to alleviate the problems that are closest to our hearts. We must be constantly on the alert to radiate to others that life in Israel, in the long-range, is not only good but is getting better.

And more: As we increasingly hear our rabbis—and our children—say, let us grab the chance to establish a society predicated on Torah values. Let us forge ahead to become a strong presence and influence in the army, in the courts, in the media. Let us combine purity and on-the-ground action to build our national home in Eretz Yisrael. Let us raise a generation imbued with dedication and even sacrifice. Let us be like the early pioneers, but with the added great ambition to live a life of sanctity in accordance with the Torah of Israel.



Let us not be fooled by what appears to be thriving Jewish life in the United States. The center and the heart of Jewish life is here in Israel. Taking active part in the enterprise that is Israel is the challenge of our times and is an opportunity that no one must miss. After sixty years, it's way past time to come home. ●

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