

Lines are up to four hours long due to special security precautions. Traffic has been backed up several kilometers on the Jerusalem-Tel Aviv highway. The airport spokesman expressed hope that the situation will return to normal in a few hours.

(Israel Radio, July 9, 2001)

Israel. I am not referring merely to the extensive economic and social repercussions: the loss of tourism; the construction projects coming to a halt; the cautiousness of investors in Israel's economy, the diminishing number of American students who come for a year of study in Israel etc. Nor am I referring to the endless tragic and cruel loss of life and its terrible scars on family, friends and fellow Jews.

Although all of this is sufficiently frightening, I am referring to something that has happened that is far more profound, something more existentially unnerving: a pall has settled upon the people of Israel. The unthinkable has perforce crept into

become confident. Among other accomplishments, Jews have been able to create a successful Torah-growth industry, backed by the commitment, affluence and influence of the Torah observant. Herzl's motto became ours: "If you want it, it is not a dream." Under such conditions, our trust in Hashem was a relatively simple matter.

It is because of the stark contrast between what we have been accustomed to and the present "Situation" that we are at a loss to know how to cope. And yet, "The Situation" and the awful, inescapable insecurity it produces has defined the Jew throughout history. Indeed, this nagging angst caused and continues to cause Jews to

"THE SITUATION"

By Avigdor Bonchek

Uppermost in every Israeli's mind these days is what has delicately been dubbed "The Situation," or "Hamatzav." Ever since the Palestinians began waging war against the State of Israel last October, this term has had only one referent—the security or more accurately, the insecurity situation in Israel. "The Situation" has had a profound effect on life in

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people's consciousness, but few have the temerity to express it—*will the State of Israel survive?! Entertaining this "impossible" thought creates an ontological earthquake within all of us, regardless of whether we are Israeli or American, religious or unaffiliated. The non-Israeli, Western Jew may have forgotten that for the past 53 years the existence of the State of Israel has given him a normal sense of identity, a sense of legitimacy. This is something that Jews had not experienced for thousands of years. With the birth of Israel, the Jew had finally become a citizen of the world. Whether he was aware of it or not, the State's existence had positively affected his conception of himself—as a Jew and as a person. World Jewry had*

try and blend into the Gentile world.

Thus, what I would call "Existential Jewish Insecurity" is, in fact, our natural state. It is an experience that has always been ours, and one that is unique to the Jew. What are the basic elements of "Existential Jewish Insecurity"? I count three.

1) Being vulnerable to wanton killings and physical attacks without the ability to protect ourselves. "We are killed all the time for Your sake, we are as sheep going to slaughter" (Psalms 44:23).

2) Being without the confidence that other friendly nations will see our plight and the justice of our cause and stand with us against our enemies. "Look to the right and see that I have no friend, escape is lost to me, no one seeks to save my life" (Psalms 142:5).

3) Being in a situation without a foreseeable end. “How long will You endlessly forget me...How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Psalms 13:2). Today, no one, either on the Right, the Left or the Center, can conceive of a way out of “The Situation.”

These, then, are the ingredients of “Existential Jewish Insecurity.” Because the Jew has, historically, lived continually under these conditions, this insecurity can be considered an integral part of being a Jew.

Not only does Jewish history attest to this reality but our daily prayers reflect this perpetual insecurity as well. Note the words in the *Tachanun* prayer:

God be not distant from us, for our soul is diminished by sword [bullets, bombs] and captivity [kidnappings], ...Rescue us...our soul is confounded by the abundance of our depression [daily killings]. We have become an object of scorn, [the UN's cynical refusal to release the video of kidnapped I.D.F. soldiers] derision, as sheep lead to

slaughter [policy of restraint] to be killed, destroyed, beaten [lynching and bludgeoning] and humiliated....

This prayer, which we have uttered for years, describes times that were—until recently—personally unknown to us; times, we were confident, would not, could not, ever return (after all, are we not living in the era of the Footsteps of the *Mashiach*?). In the past, we had to make a concerted effort to identify with our ancestors' precarious plight. None of us ever really believed that we too would ever experience such awful soul-wrenching conditions, conditions that challenge our ability to hope, and foster an abiding sense of being alone in a world that couldn't care less.

The Torah records Bilam's famous phrase, “A nation that dwells alone” (Bamidbar 23:9) as a blessing. However, Bilam's words have become a mixed blessing. We are left with a sick-

ening feeling of being abandoned by the civilized nations of the world. Certainly, you say, we knew of our isolation all along. But there is knowing, and there is *knowing*...

What can be said at this point? Perhaps this. “The Situation” is our heritage. We now have the dubious distinction of being one with our forefathers who also “desired, but were not granted, to dwell in tranquility” (Rashi, Genesis 37:2). We can now appreciate the poetry, the promise as well as the pain of being “a nation that dwells alone.” We now have, probably for the first time in our own lives, truly become part of Jewish history and its unique and awesome heritage, with all that that means.

A burden has been thrust upon us, transforming us into complete Jews, insecurities and all. The question we must ask ourselves is can we live with “The Situation” with the same tenacity, self-respect and faith as our forefathers so courageously did? **JA**



Five-month-old Yehuda Chaim Shoham, z”l, the youngest victim of stoning attacks in Israel, being laid to rest in Shilo (June, 2001).