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My visit to Palestine, 1945.

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MY VISIT TO PALESTINE

WRHS

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, December 23, 1945

When I was a boy I used to read about the wonder Rabbis, these Zadikim who had a miraculous gift if they were needed at certain times and certain places quickly in order to rescue some deserving Jew from serious danger of traveling large distances by miraculous flight.

Today that is possible for far less famous people, for far more ordinary people. At short notice, I packed my grip and flew all the way to Palestine in 40 hours, in fact, in actual flying time, a little less than 35 hours. When I completed my mission I flew right back again. All the way from Washington to Jerusalem and back to Jerusalem -- a distance perhaps ten or twelve thousand miles never once having occasion to use a railroad or a boat. And so there is today a direct non-stop flight from Jerusalem to London in about ten hours.

What was once a distant out-of-the-way legend-shrouded country, Palestine, difficult of access, off the beaten track, is today very much in the center of things, in the main stream of human commerce, trade, communication. The principal trans-continental airways which connects Europe with Asia in the Far East, and which connects Africa with Europe and Asia passes through Palestine or very near Palestine.

There are many factors which contribute to Palestine's increasing importance. Not the least of them is this key position which Palestine now holds as one of the cross-roads of world air travel. And the air field at Lydda which services both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv can compare very favorably with important airfields in our own country both as to size and equipment. There are other airfields in Palestine and more in the process of construction.

And this is not the only ultra-modern feature about the country. Years ago when an American tourist visited Palestine, it was like stepping from the 20th century back into the 15th. You still get that impression when you visit most of the countries of the Near East or in Africa. The Oriental world is still centuries behind the Occidental. The unchanging Near East has changed very little indeed. You see the same implements used five hundred years ago, a thousand years ago.

For manufacturing the same rudimentary apparatuses are used, not to speak of the same squalor, poverty and dark narrow, filthy streets where people live, the disease, unsanitary conditions. But you no longer get that impression when you visit Palestine today.

Palestine is modern in every sense of the word. A citizen of the West, an American, lives very comfortably. In many of the larger cities of Palestine today I missed few of the things which I enjoy at home. I was in Palestine the last time about eight years ago, before the world war. I had been there three or four years before that. My first visit was right after the first world war. Even during the eight years between my last visit and this one, the country has enjoyed a remarkable progress. One finds modern homes, the latest design, in good taste being built everywhere. The streets are wide, as are the boulevards. The shops, stores, are very attractive. There are modern hotels, restaurants, cinemas presenting the latest from Hollywood. You wouldn't recognize the inscription because it is all in Hebrew. But the faces you would recognize -- they are all from Hollywood. Women would not miss beauty-shops. They are there. Men in business will not miss the growing number of shops, plants with modern installation, the very large oil refineries. No wonder that the American soldier from the areas of the Middle East when he was given a furlough loved to go to Palestine and Tel Aviv. For that country reminded him of home, unlike all the other countries of the Near East not to speak of the hospitality they received at the homes of people in Palestine.

The tempo of Palestine is dynamic. You speak to people of expansion. People are full of ideas and talk, now that the war is over, of ideas, of building up the country of being ready to go ahead with great economic industrial expansion which in a ~~decade~~ decade or two, I believe, if the political straight-jacket is removed not only in Palestine, but in the Near East, will be possible.

But there is so much else in the country. There is trade, agriculture. There is a very intensive cultural life. I don't know ^{one} ~~what~~ place on the face of the earth

where there is so much intellectual activity going on. There are modern schools, with the latest equipment and the most modern progressive methods of education in the high schools, in the technical schools not to speak of the great Hebrew University in Tel Aviv, situated on Mt. Scopus, the libraries, museums, the outstanding orchestra anywhere in the Near East. Palestine has an amazing number of musicians from all parts of Europe. There are in that little country eleven Hebrew dailies not speak of weekly and monthly publications and a good press of high calibre, over twenty publishing houses which printed, I was told, last year, four hundred distinct items. Books by the tens of thousands are read by the people of Palestine.

And of course the country of Palestine has a highly developed system of social agencies, philanthropic institutions, homes for the aged, almost un-numbered orphanages, clinics, hospitals — the great Hadassah Hospital.

In other words, what you find when you visit Palestine today is a modern growing enterprising civilized land all of which ^{however} has not destroyed the peculiar charm and mystery of the country. You have there a modern world, as modern as there is with the most advanced physical research laboratories of the Hebrew University against the background of all that world of mystery, legend, romance which is Palestine.

Nor has this progress of the country washed out its color. It has not made it, as industrialization is likely to do in some other countries made Palestine drab or monotonous. Palestine still has the mark of many races and of many civilizations. One meets here men from all parts of the world, of all religions, especially of the three great religions, innumerable mosques, churches, monasteries, not speak of numerous synagogues. Their dress, their speech, the manner of all these people is distinctive. On the streets of Jerusalem or Haifa you are likely to meet in the space of a few minutes, monks, scientists, scholars, pioneers, nomads, famous professors from numerous universities, desert people — and all of them also from in one intense life movement. The Jews you see in Palestine are also from all over the world —

from India, Yemen, Bokhara, from Morroco, Poland, New Zealand, the United States. They are all there. Mystics, Kabbalite, Chassidim, -- they are all there. They make up the composite life of the Yishub, of the Jewish community in Palestine.

There are a few things, however, which unite them all. What you meet is not a heterogeneous and conglomerate race. It is not a disintegrated group of Jews. Quite the contrary. You have the sense of solidarity in spite of the powerful distinctiveness which make up the groups. What holds them together is first of all the Hebrew language. The Jews in Palestine speak Hebrew -- all of them -- even the refugees regard it as a matter of pride to acquire the language. It is not rare to see young men with dictionaries learning the language. The school, of course, have given the country one common speech. The children learn in the public schools and in the high schools in Hebrew. That is the language of instruction. And the parents try to keep up with the children. All the great classics of the world are now being translated into that language. It is very interesting to visit a lecture room at a University and hear a lecture delivered by a famous scientist from Austria, Czechoslovakia, or Germany in Hebrew..

In this country I occasionally hear complaints -- why should we teach our children the Hebrew language? -- No resistance to learning German or French or Spanish, but there is a resistance to learning Hebrew. Hebrew is today one of the living languages of the world. In another few years there will probably be a million and a half people who use that language as their native speech. This is one of the backbones which unites the Jewish community of Palestine.

Then there is a common way of life which unites them unconsciously. The Sabbath, for example. The Sabbath is a day of rest for everybody. It makes no difference whether you are Orthodox or Reform Jew. The shops, the stores are closed. That is true on Passover and on Shabuot. These are national holidays. And unconsciously what we regard as things specifically religious, in Palestine are characteristically nationalistic -- the way of life of the people. One may

observe the Sabbath more rigorously than the other, but it is the way of life and there is no question about it. There is no question about eating Kosher or Trefeh in Palestine. There is no Trefeh in Palestine.

Sense of Patriotism. They are loyal to this great thing being built there, and the dangers which threaten it simply seems to draw them together more and more and in spite of any divisions which exist between them, political, social or economic, quite as many as exist in this country, on basic fundamentalism there is a sense of solidarity, discipline, especially during the time I was there and during the recent months one experienced this sense of fundamental unity among the people in the face of the dangers which threatened them.

I was rather surprised and pleased in that I found life in Palestine far more normal than I anticipated. From reading the newspapers one gets the impression that it is almost dangerous to live in Palestine, that there is fighting strife going on there and that there are endless curfews. Not at all! Life goes on ~~xxx~~ very normally, the Arabs and Jews trading together, Jewish housewives still purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables when they need them from Arab vendors when they come around. Before I arrived there was a celebration by the Jewish colonies up North of the 75th anniversary of a Mr. Shapiro who is himself a legend in the country. He was a founder and a watchman, one of the builders of many of the colonies. His 75th anniversary was celebrated. Twenty Arab Shiekhs came to that colony where the celebration was going on. They brought gifts to the celebration enjoying with the Jews ~~in~~ a day-long celebration of festivity. In the afternoon they displayed their horsemanship for the delight of all who were present..

Most of the noise and rioting that you hear about in connection with Palestine is the work of the non-Palestine Arabs from Egypt, Tripoli, Iran. In Palestine the Arabs and Jews have reached a sort of equilibrium of strength. The Arabs know it isn't worthwhile to start trouble with the Jews. And certainly the Jews are not anxious to start trouble with the Arabs, and both ~~x~~ groups respect this fact. The tension which exists is not between Jews and Arabs, but between Jews

and Great Britain, between the Jews and the Mandatory because the Jews are determined to have refugees come into the country and the British are determined to keep them out. The highways of Palestine are filled with British troops which are, according to the Mandatory, to see to it that these helpless, unfortunate people do not come illegally into the country. That is what mighty England is doing. The coastline is covered by British destroyers, airplanes, radar, the latest scientific invention. All this is to see to it that the war-ravaged, doomed men and women who are fleeing to Palestine as to their last place of refuge, are kept out of it.

I was in Palestine during the incident of Rishpon, when there were clashes between the British troops and the Jewish settlers in which eight Jews were killed and quite a number wounded. I visited those settlements within twelve hours of the incident. I had just arrived in Palestine, visited the hospital and spoke to the wounded. The whole incident was the result of an attempt of the Mandatory Government to trace down illegal immigrants who had come into the country whom the Jewish people were determined to protect and not permit their deportation. It was almost ludicrous to see a whole British division of from ten to fifteen thousand soldiers, dozens of tanks, armored cars and airplanes in the air searching a little Jewish colony to try to find a few helpless illegal immigrants who might have smuggled into that country to seek refuge. This is what causes the tension in Palestine today, and this is what will continue to cause tension and cause, I am afraid, more shedding of blood for the Yishuv is incensed against the closed door policy in Palestine. You see, they are very near to Europe. Many in Palestine have last surviving relatives in some of the concentration camps still existing in Germany and elsewhere. They want to get them to Palestine. They want to save them. They know that thousands are dying daily. They know that many are fleeing from Poland into Germany to escape the present-day Polish pogroms. 300 km Jews, it is reported, are fleeing from Poland westward into Germany, into the American zone of occupation; they are also fleeing from Austria. It is their relatives -- the relatives of the Jews in

Palestine.

During the war, they were told nothing could be done because of the war. So they restrained themselves from doing anything. Millions of Jews were killed. They hoped that when the war was over, the doors of Palestine would be opened, for the last surviving remnants of their people. Months passed, but nothing happened. A new government came into power in England pledged to open the doors of Palestine -- and nothing happened. The President of the United States requested of Prime Minister Attlee to make it possible for one hundred thousand Jews to go to Palestine -- and nothing happened. Then came the miserable, shabby substitute of a Committee of Enquiry -- months and months again to find facts which are crystal clear to everybody. So the Jews of Palestine decided to do their utmost to bring the Jews to Palestine regardless of any action which the Mandatory Government will take. They will defend Palestine with their lives and defy the government. They will make a maximum effort to see that any Jew who reaches the shores of Palestine or the portals of Palestine shall remain in Palestine. As soon as this illegal restriction upon immigration is removed, all this tension will vanish and Palestine will be able to proceed with the work which it has been so busily and wonderfully engaged in during the last few years -- that of building.

I wish I had more time to tell you about the building and rebuilding, about the nature and quality of work. This morning I want to call your attention to one or two things of ingenuity, originality, the capacity of these builders to create, to "create things out of nothing." I spent two days around the Dead Sea. Now the Dead Sea is about the deadest sea in the world. It is nearly fourteen hundred feet below sea level. Nothing can live in that sea of salt. That Dead Sea was there for centuries, millennia....The Dead Sea was a total waste, as was the whole area, hundreds of miles around it. Today there is a vast plant both at the northern tip and southern tip of the Dead Sea which takes the salt water from the Sea, and by a process of evaporation treats and produces potash. And today Palestine supplies

tens of thousands of tons of Potash for fertilizer to all parts of the world... That is what I mean by creating something out of nothing.

Along the shores of the Dead Sea there is now going on an amazing experiment. About two miles from this plant, a small kibbutz of 150 young Jewish men and women live and they are experimenting with the soil around the Dead Sea. The soil is saturated with about eighteen percent salt. Nothing can grow there. With the aid of the scientists at the Hebrew University, a process of blanching the soil, of taking that soil and washing it so that they reduce the salt content from eighteen percent to less than one percent. This Kibbutz, in existence less than two years, brought in from the land that they were experimenting with, some of the most luscious tomatoes and vegetables that I have ever seen. They were maintaining a herd of cattle as sleek as any Pharaoh ever had -- all on this land which was waste and desert since the beginning of time. They were raising flowers and selling them in Jerusalem -- "creating something out of nothing." And if this experiment turns out economically sound, as every indication seems to point, it means that vast stretches of land around the Dead Sea where today you can't see any human habitation, will someday become flourishing communities sustaining human life and enriching human life.

That is the type of work that is going on in Palestine... That is the challenge... Jewish 'sachel' is getting amazing results.

I want to close with a little story which illustrates the type of human beings in Palestine, the type of chalutzim. When I was there I was given a book which was just off the press, a book of poems written by a young Jewish girl, a Hungarian girl by the name of Hannah Senesh. The girl came from Hungary some six or seven years ago. She was not from a Zionist home, rather from the home of assimilationist people -- most Hungarian Jews came from such homes. When Nazism began to make headway she decided to go to Palestine. She wanted a sense of spiritual security. She went to Palestine and entered an Agricultural School,

spent two years learning how to become an expert in farming so that she could become a farmer or the wife of a farmer. After she completed her studies she joined one of the kibbutzim spent two years on one of the cooperative colonies, just for the joy of working together and living with the people there -- no profits, no private wealth -- one for all and all for one. The war was on and it became important for the Yishuv to send some of its representatives as emissaries to the Nazi dominated countries of Europe to remain behind the enemy lines, organize groups for later emigration to Palestine, to sustain the hope of the people. She volunteered to be one of the "shlichim". She left Palestine, passed through other countries and found her way to Hungary then occupied by the Nazis, carried on her work in extreme danger and with great bravery. Finally, she was caught and tortured to death. Before she died she managed to write this poem which was incorporated in this book which was memorialized by the Jews of Palestine.

I read you these four lines from her poem. It illustrates the spirit of the youth which today go to Palestine and build that country.

but

"Blessed is the Match that is burnt out/which first kindled great fires
"Blessed is the fire which burns in the deep recesses of the Heart
"Blessed is the heart which knows how to die in Honor
"Blessed is the Match that is burnt but which first kindled great fires."

They all regard themselves as matches which may themselves burn down, burn out, but which before they burn out will kindle great fires. They care very little about themselves, their personal comfort, their personal happiness. They are chalutzim, with a heart for a great holy task....

I am inclined to believe that that Jewish community in Palestine will someday be greatly endowed to bless us and bless mankind.

sermon 666

1) When I was a boy - 2130 23, 27 - miraculous translation &
from place to place. - Traversed large distance by miraculous
flight.

To-day that is possible for less favored ¹³⁵ - ordinary
mortals.

at short notice I packed my ~~stuff~~ ^{grip} and flew all the way &
in 40 hrs - actual flying time only 3 hrs.

And when I completed my mission, I flew back again -

From Wash. to Texas. Back again - a distance, over 10,000

and never once did I use train or boat -

There is a direct non-stop flight now running regularly
bet. London & Texas - in 9 hrs.

What was once a distant, ^{out-of-the-way and} ~~out-of-the-way~~ far away, beyond-
shouldered land, difficult of access & off the beaten track
is to-day very much ^{way} ~~in~~ the center, things, on the main-
high-way, travel - & deep within the ~~main~~ stream of
the main-currents of life.

The ^{transcontinental} principal air-lines ~~pass~~ connecting the 3 continents &
going from Europe to Far East, & from Cape Town N.
pass thru Atl. a very near it - so that a thousand
men connect with them.

There are many factors which contribute to P's view of
importance - ^{at least} among them is this key position which it
holds ^{now} ~~at~~ the cross-roads, the world's air-hub.
Lydda, ~~where~~ the airport which serves T.G. & Ben
can compare favorably with many (the other airports)

on our country. There are other air fields in Pal. & (2)
more in the process / construction..

2/ This is not the only ultra-modern feature, the ancient
land.

Years ago - when an Amer. ~~at~~ arrived at Pal. - on a visit
stept from 20 C. into 15C. -

You still get that impression - other lands, Near East - or

Africa.

The Oriental world is still centuries behind - The understand
East has changed but little - (slightly)

You no longer get that impression - Pal. is modern.

A Westerner ^{can} ~~is~~ ^{be} comfortably at home there -

8 yrs. ago - remarkable progress - modern ~~at~~ houses -

streets - shops - cinemas - hotels, restaurants =

beauty shops - factories - plants. at Bhamis =

Tempo - American ^(Am. Soldiers) - Dynamite - Planes - Powered -

Advances - Near East -

Much else - Cultural life - Schools ^{Univ.} A libraries

Museums ^{Theatres} Orchestra - Press - 20 Pub. Hous.

400 beds -

Social services - Hospitals - Chinamen -

Have not destroyed the charm & mystery, Holy Land -

A modern world - most advanced Phys. Research Lab. - within
the frame, Eternal Hells, Judea - & the ancient history - & the

Sharon - 8 dead - many wounded.

Yishuv is wounded - closed doors - During has - End, has - Later - Now! Long wait ^{for days}
~~now determine~~ 100.000 - ~~has~~ Can, Refugee + Refugee -

(a) Yishuv is determined - ① free in injury! ② compensation
③ no deportation -

(b) more blood-shed -

(c) Heartened by Congress - Truman.

b) Have not time - ^{Bure 6 alone - 2 months} Nature + Quality - - filed 6 -

① Dead Sea - Potash - ② = pile in no -

② Spirit - 60000 in Hungary - 11217 - Pol.

in ill - gifted - In 1939 at age 7 18 - Pol.
- opposed to Zion - Refuge - Something to believe in - Purpose
- Agri. School - 2 yrs - Then 11217 - Same area - 2 yrs
- worked - working - working.

- So back to Hungary - do Nazi - during war 1944 - ^{son}
to org. youth for Pol. - hope - gas chambers

Blessed is the match that is burnt ^{out} but which ^{first} kindled great fires
Blessed is the fire which burns in the deep recesses of the heart
Blessed is the heart which knows how to die in honor
Blessed is the match that is burnt but which ^{first} kindled great fires