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Differences not resolved by the sword, 1961.

Conflict and Coexistence

Differences Not Resolved by the Sword

by Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

IN the thirteen prologue years of its existence, the State of Israel has clearly indicated the basic design of its national life and the unfolding lines of its future development.

By its faithful allegiance to the democratic processes, by the development of its educational system and its institutions of higher learning, by its advanced social legislation, by the aid which it has extended to less developed nations of Africa and Asia, and by the maintenance of peace, in the face of boycott, blockade and the menacing contrivances of its unreconciled neighbors, Israel has announced the ground-tone of its chosen way of life, its fundamental purposes and its dominant interests as a nation. All this is in complete accord with the ancient and noble traditions of our people. And it is this which, in my humble judgment, makes us rejoice today as Israel completes its thirteen prologue years of testing and probation, even more than its extraordinary material progress.

What now of the future?

It would be nice if, to quote the poet, we could "dip into the future and see the visions of the world and all the wonders that would be," but we cannot do it. No one can guarantee the future of a people, or of the human race, but God Himself, and He has evidently chosen to keep us guessing. He seems to have said to us, though not in so many words, keep working and have faith. The men in the past who had faith and kept working in despite of all uncertainty and discouragement, won through. The very success of our movement and the notable achievements in Israel are supreme triumphs of faith; for everything pointed to certain failure and defeat.

The days to come, my dear friends, will make even greater demands upon our faith and our perseverance than ever before. Israel will not be able to escape the political tensions and pressures of the world of which it is, and will continue to be, a part. Grave, unsolved problems—internal and external—still remain. Danger lurks upon its borders. The timid among us and those who are not inured to the hard pull and the long stretch will fall away. The brave of heart, those who have faith in Israel, in Israel's destiny, in themselves and in the endless resources of the human spirit, these will carry on, and will score rewarding victories in the exciting days which lie ahead. Faith will be the bridge which will carry us over.

THE two foremost world powers today, the United States and the Soviet Union, have both played a role in the formative years of the State of Israel, though their roles have not been of equal weight, of course, or of equal importance. Certainly our country has given Israel through the years continuous and generous support which the Soviet Union has not. But both countries will continue to play a role in the future of the State of Israel, whether positive or negative.

The Soviet Union was the first member of the United Nations, the first great power in the United Nations, to speak up in May, 1947 for an independent Jewish state in Palestine. This act was momentous. The Soviet Union was the second of the great powers to grant recognition to the State of Israel two days after it was established. In his message conveying the official recognition of his Government, the then Foreign Minister Molotov expressed "the confidence of his Government in the successful development of friendly relations between the U.S.S.R. and the State of Israel." That, too, was of vital importance to Israel.

Since then, the Soviet Union's attitude towards Israel has undergone a steady

deterioration. The cold war which has engulfed the East and the West, and the feverish hunt for allies, regardless of cost, has set the Soviet Union courting the Arab States, even as the United States has been courting them. It was a foregone conclusion, of course, that these States, these Arab States, would prove a broken reed to lean on, both for the East and the West. The West was the first to experience the inevitable disillusionment, and now the Soviet Union is beginning to taste the bitterness of Arab unreliability. Perhaps the Soviet Union will, before long, see the need to re-appraise its position in the Middle East, and will take another look at Nasser and his alleged pro-Soviet sympathies.

There is no reason, in my humble judgment, why the Soviet Union, in its compelling drive for coexistence, should not find it possible to coexist in friendship with the State of Israel, in spite of the fact that Israel is a democracy and is determined to remain so.

I was in the Soviet Union recently. From what I saw and from what I heard, I was confirmed in the position which I have maintained right along. Please do not read in any more than what I am going to say. I know it is difficult to maintain this position, which I have maintained for quite a number of years, in the midst of the very foul and fearful weather which has recently swept over the international scene. But the present crisis actually underscores this position. I have always believed in coexistence of the two systems, ours and theirs, and I have for years advocated it. The Russians have adopted a way of life which is theirs. I would not choose it for myself or for America. To us it has stark and basic defects which we cannot ignore, as it has certain merits which we should not underestimate. But their way of life is theirs, and whatever is wrong with it they themselves will have to correct in the future.

It has not been demonstrated that the two systems cannot exist side by side. They each claim that they can—but each makes its own reservations. There is much, in my humble judgment, that each can learn from the other, though neither at the moment seems to be inclined to acknowledge it. Neither system has said the last word. Both have undergone change in the past, and undoubtedly will do so in the future. Life, the exigencies of life, may bring them much closer together, even though their dogmas and ideologies seem to be irreconcilable.

Certainly their differences cannot be resolved by the sword. The problem before the world today is not which system is the better, but how the two can keep from destroying one another—and mankind. Both are strongly entrenched and sufficiently powerful that one cannot destroy the other without destroying itself. The question is then not which will bury the other, but whether a war, once unleashed between the East and the West, will not bury them both.

We must learn to live on the same globe with the Soviet people, even as they with us. There is no alternative. Neither they nor we are invariably in the right. The leaders of both countries must try to reduce tensions. More sabre-rattling will not improve the situation. The breaking up of the Geneva talks on a test ban and the resumption of nuclear weapons' testing by the Soviet Government in recent days are shocking examples of this dangerous sabre-rattling which can only increase the dangers to the peace of the world. Nothing can be said of what has come out of the Soviet Union in the last few days, but utter and complete condemnation. The peoples

of the world are waiting for a sign of a new and inspired statesmanship both in the Kremlin and the White House. The old has led us nowhere, only from one crisis to another. That is why my position through the years has been that the two systems should not be afraid to trade with each other in goods or in ideas. Let them compete in only one way—which system can do more for its people.

IT is, therefore, not as enemies of the Soviet Union or in order to increase tensions that I and others draw attention to the unfavorable position in which the Jewish people, as a nationality group, finds itself in the Soviet Union today. As individuals, Jews fare no better and no worse there than all other Soviet citizens. It would, of course, be untrue to suggest that all anti-Semitism has been eradicated there, that it vanished with the coming of the Revolution. This would be a utopian assumption, I am afraid, even for the United States. But cultural and religious discrimination is undoubtedly being practiced against the Jewish minority in the Soviet Union. The fundamental law off the U.S.S.R. grants cultural autonomy and equality to all nationality groups. They have a right to their own language, schools, press and other cultural activities. This has been one of the honorable and proud boasts of the Soviet Union. The Jewish nationality group, however, because it is an extra-territorial community, so to speak, not centered in any one territory or region of the Union, has, in fact, been denied these rights.

Under Lenin, and for a time thereafter, Jewish nationality rights were not only recognized in the Soviet Union but implemented. The teaching of Yiddish and Hebrew was not interdicted. There was a Yiddish press and a Yiddish and Hebrew theatre, and in localities where Jews were predominant, there were Jewish Soviets and courts of law whose business was conducted in Yiddish. There were Yiddish schools attended by tens of thousands of Jewish children. Under Stalin, these rights were brutally abrogated and a campaign of persecution tainted with a thinly-veiled anti-Semitism set in.

With the death of Stalin and his official "depreciation," if you might call it that at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, the situation eased somewhat, though many of the obnoxious practices still remain. Yiddish writers who had been executed under the Stalin terror and purges have been officially reinstated and some of their works have been recently published. Bergelson, Schweitzman—I picked up their books on the shelves of a Moscow bookshop. The works of Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Se-forim and L.L. Peretz have also been published. The myth that no Yiddish reading public exists in the Soviet Union has been exposed. A half-million Jews still claim Yiddish as their mother-tongue. A few days ago, the very first Yiddish periodical since 1948, a bi-monthly literary review, made its appearance in Moscow.

But much still remains to be corrected. I had occasion to discuss these matters at great length with some important Soviet officials. I am inclined to the belief that further progress in the direction of granting the Jewish minority in the Soviet Union the same cultural and religious considerations which are accorded all other nationalities and religious groups can still be made, given a friendly and insistent world Jewish opinion.

I share the opinion of the former Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Mr. George F. Kennan, who wrote in his recent book, *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*:

"I am inclined to ascribe deep and encouraging significance to some of the changes in the character and structure of the Soviet regime that have taken place since Stalin's death. The drastic alteration in the role of the police has constituted a basic change in the nature and the spirit of the Soviet society. It has also altered somewhat the character of the political process, particularly in the senior echelons of the Party, away from the horror of unadulterated police intrigue and in the direction of a rudimentary parliamentarianism, at least within the Central Committee. . . . The relaxation of the Iron Curtain has, to date, remained within modest limits. But I think it has gone so far that it would not be easy to bottle up again the intellectual and cultural life of this talented people as it was bottled up under Stalin."

I do not believe that Russian Jewry should be written off. I do not believe that the three million Russian Jews should be written off. Many have undoubtedly been assimilated in the past forty years, having been denied Jewish cultural and religious education, and having been cut off from contact with world Jewry. In some instances this assimilation was self-willed and eager. But many have retained an unshaken racial loyalty and an historic attachment, which though not vocal are strong and unmistakable.

I was told by someone who knows that the day the rocket went up in Israel, the Jews assembled in the synagogue and went around and shook each other's hand and said *Mazel Tov*.

I was told that in the film festival there Israel also participated and showed some of the moving pictures produced in Israel. Every country was allowed an evening for a showing. The tickets for the Israeli showing were sold out weeks ahead in Moscow at five rubles apiece, and thousands couldn't get in. It was not a great film, some documentary about development. And those who did get in wept and many of them shouted with joy when some achievement was recorded on the screen before their eyes.

I was told by someone that last Simchas Torah, before the Synagogue in Leningrad ten thousand Jews crowded the streets and danced for joy—for *Simchas Torah*.

I mention these isolated incidents not to give you the impression at all that Jewish life in the Soviet Union is vigorous and vibrant—it isn't—but to indicate that there is still a great yearning for identification with *Kol Yisrael* among the many Jews of the Soviet Union, that there is still a spark, that there is still a sense of history and remembrance on the part of tens of thousands of them which should not be written off. And I believe that if this trend which has developed in the last few years and which has made itself manifest in these isolated instances of the publication of Jewish books and so forth continues and is encouraged by friendly and persistent public opinion, then perhaps more can be done in this direction. I certainly do not believe that Russian Jewry should be written off.

THE United States has played a major role in the formative years of the State of Israel and it has been consistently friendly, though at times vague, hesitant and involved. Because of this lack of precision, it has, on occasion, disturbed even friends who never questioned its fundamental goodwill. In troubled times, indefiniteness in matters of national policy may lead to international misunderstandings, misinterpretations and,

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at times, to action or lack of action which was never intended.

It was hoped that the new administration would be less vague and hesitant in matters which affected peace and security in the Middle East. I recall, as you all do, the magnificent address which Mr. Kennedy, then the Democratic candidate for the Presidency of the United States, delivered before the Convention of the Zionist Organization of America just a year ago. I was present, and I shared the enthusiasm with which it was greeted. In the course of that major policy address, he declared:

"There has been enough rhetoric in recent years about free transit through the Suez Canal to float every boat through it—but there has been no leadership. Our policy in Washington and in the United Nations has permitted defiance of our 1956 pledge with impunity—indeed, with economic reward.

"If America's word to the world is to have any meaning—if the decisions and resolutions of the United Nations are to be binding on all parties—if the Mutual Security Amendment which I co-sponsored with Senator Douglas is to have meaning—if the clear, thoughtful language of the Democratic platform is to have meaning—the influence of this nation and other maritime powers must be brought to bear on a just solution that removes all discrimination from the Suez Canal. . . ."

Unfortunately, the influence of our nation has as yet not been brought to bear to remove the outrageous discrimination against Israel in the Suez Canal.

Mr. Kennedy further declared in his address:

"We have also had much rhetoric in

recent years about the arms race in the Middle East. I propose that an international effort be made to limit an arms race in the Middle East with a realization that if this is not accomplished, we shall not permit an imbalance to exist which threatens the right of any country to self-defense."

The arms race in the Middle East has not been limited, and a dangerous imbalance threatening the security of Israel and its right to self-defense has been permitted not only to exist but to develop even more ominously.

Further, Mr. Kennedy said:

"I propose that all the authority of the White House be used to call into conference the leaders of Israel and the Arab States to consider privately their common problems, assuring them that we support in full their aspirations for peace, unity and independence and a better life—and that we are prepared to back up this moral commitment with economic and technical assistance.

"The offer should be made with equal frankness to both sides . . . and I promise to waste no time in taking that initiative."

The national press has reported that the President did contact the heads of the Arab states and of Israel. What has been the reaction of the Arab governments and of Israel to this presidential initiative? Who accepted his good offices and who rejected them? Which government was cynically prepared to bear the burden of breaking the peace? And will this unsolved problem now be allowed to rest there?

And what of the Arab boycott against American firms trading with Israel which is continuing unabated while our government submits supinely to Arab discrimination practiced against American citizens? The Arab League continues to dictate to our State Department the con-

ditions under which American companies shall carry on their commercial activities abroad, which American ships shall be allowed to call at Israeli ports, and whether Jewish servicemen can serve at American service bases abroad. It is baffling indeed. A government which can defy the might of the Soviet in defense of the rights of German citizens in West Berlin, finds it inadvisable or impossible to defend the rights of its own citizens in Saudi Arabia. . . . Is this the price which we are required to pay for Arab votes in the United Nations—votes which indeed are seldom forthcoming?

I BELIEVE that in these matters, too, things are likely to change for the better, if a friendly and persistent public opinion makes itself heard in the councils of government. I fully realize the Government's preoccupation with international problems. But peace in the Middle East is a very, very grave matter. The goodwill and good intentions of President Kennedy and his administration are beyond question. But, as the President himself put it, "there has been enough rhetoric in recent years." Action is now imperative and eagerly awaited.

Let me conclude with the words with which I began: "Faith will be the bridge which will carry us over." These are grave, uncertain, and, in a sense, dangerous times for all nations and for Israel. But the last thirteen years have also marked a wonderful new beginning for our people.

Our ancient prophets looked back upon the period of the Exodus from Egypt and the sojourn in the wilderness as upon the bright, early morning of their race, the golden period in the history of their people. They spoke of it with deep love and nostalgia. "I remember the devotion

of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was then holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest." The prophets Amos, Micah, Ezekiel, and the later Isaiah, all recall with tenderness and affection the days of Israel's youth, the days of freedom, selection and marvelous promise. The first *Shir*—the first song of glorious rejoicing in God—was sung, said the Rabbis, not by any of the Patriarchs, but by Moses and the Children of Israel after they escaped from Egypt.

These prophets knew, of course, how often the people had sinned during their wanderings in the wilderness, the worship of the Golden Calf, and of Baal pe'or. They knew of their endless contentions and murmurings. They knew also of the bitter physical privations and sufferings of the people in their wanderings through "that great and terrible wilderness." Nevertheless, they looked back upon those days of great new beginnings as glorious and creative days when Israel set out upon its career as a nation.

Our generation, too, has been privileged to witness an Exodus and to enjoy the bright, early morning of national rebirth. A great and terrible wilderness, where millions of our people perished, led us at long last to freedom and to reborn hopes. A glorious radiance will always shine over the heads of this generation. Future ages will look back upon this period of Jewish history with pride and nostalgia. They will be moved to say: *Kadesh Yamenu ke-Kedem*—renew our days with the courage and grandeur of the days of old.

May we, of this favored generation, tried, heavily burdened, prove ourselves worthy of our privileged destiny.