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Israel Revisited, 1987.

Israel Revisited
Daniel Jeremy Silver
May 3, 1987

Believe it or not, it's good to be home. It's good to be where the heart is. It's good to be here. As we traveled around the world we went to many services. Many were quite lovely, moving. Some, unfortunately, were not. All in all there is no service like the one with which you are most familiar. It speaks to you on so many different levels: family, friendship, spirit. It is a lift to be again a part of this service.

Now to the business at hand. We are accustomed to approach Israel from the west. Israel is to the east. We fly out of New York or Boston. We may fly directly or we may stop in Rome or London. Whichever flight we take the direction is eastward. The Jewish experience associates Israel, Jerusalem, with the east. In the synagogues there is usually a wall plaque, the mizrach, which indicates the direction towards which one worship should be directed, towards Jerusalem. Judah Ha-Levi the Spanish romantic poet-philosopher wrote one of the most beloved of all Zionist hymns which begins with a feeling many Jews have known: "My heart is in the East, but I am in the depths of the West."

When we fly West to East, the trip comes off easily. There are no particular problems associated with it. This was the first time I had ever approached Israel from further East. Coming Westward there are all kinds of problems. In the first place, you can't get from Points East to Ben Gurion Airport. There are no direct flights from Singapore or Bangkok or Bombay to Israel. To get to Jerusalem, you must fly to some port in Europe - Athens, Rome or Frankfurt and then double back. Coming from the Far East you are forced to recognize that the relationship of most Asian nations to Israel is quite different than it is in the West. In Indonesia, our second last stop, we tried to send letters to friends in Jerusalem. The Indonesian post-office does not forward mail to Israel. During the 15th, 16th, and 17th century, Islam made significant advances in Southeast

Asia and became the dominant religion of Malaysia, Indonesia and in many parts of the Indian sub-continent. During this century, these countries become active participants in the whole political crusade of Islam, including of course, that dedicated to the undoing of Israel. Israel does not simply face the Arab world, but the Islamic world which Asia makes you realize is twice again as large.

Asia contains more than half of the world's population and most Asiatic people live in countries that do not recognize the Jewish state. Israel has embassies only in a few fringe countries: Nepal, Thailand, Singapore, The Phillipines, Taiwan, and Japan. To realize that there are no official relationships with most Asian countries is to recognize that the heretofore intransigent opposition of Third World and the Arab world is beginning to break down is not necessarily borne out by facts on the ground. When President Herzog made a state visit to Singapore and the Phillipines a few months ago, Malaysia and Indonesia expended considerable political pressure on Singapore to cancel the visit, arguing that as a fellow ASEAN country, Singapore should bring its foreign policy in line with theirs which is hard line anti-Israeli, and in the case of Malaysia, close to being unabashedly anti-semitic.

Such attitudes are in evidence not only in the countries which have large Muslim populations. India is predominantly Hindu. She has Muslim Pakistan on her Northwestern border and Muslim Bangladesh on her North-eastern border. India's cities have been the scene for a constant series of street riots between Muslims and Hindus and yet from 1948 to this day, India has refused to recognize Israel and has been a leader among the non aligned nations who have taken a hard line opposing Israel's attempts to become part of various international bodies.

India has refused to allow Israeli citizens to take part in international conference held there. She has refused to allow Israeli sports people to compete in competitions held in India. Happily at the moment

she is hoisted on her own petard. The Israeli tennis team, of all things, surprised Czechoslovakia in the first round of the Davis Cup this year. According to the luck of the draw, Israel must play India in the second round and the match is scheduled for India. India faces a problem since she has consistently refused to allow Israeli athletes to enter the country. If she refuses to allow the Israelis to compete, she must forfeit her chances at the Davis Cup and apparently she would also be banned from competition for several years.

When you come from Asia to Israel, you are forced to recognize that ostracism, the embargo, is still very much in place. On our flight from Singapore to Athens, the plane put down in Dubai, one of those little points of land on the edge of the oil map of the Arabian peninsula. The plane developed some radar problems and could not continue so we had to wait until another aircraft could be sent from Singapore. Since the delay was extended, the passengers were allowed to leave the airport to visit Dubai; but before this was arranged officials of Singapore Air announced that anyone who had an Israeli passport or a passport which had in it a visa which indicated that they had visited Israel, would not be allowed to leave the airport's transit area. We were there for over half a day. In Asia to believe that the Third World is beginning to have second thoughts about Israel, you must overlook the evidence on the ground and in the air.

Since I am trying to give you an impressionist feeling about Israel let me continue with another vignette taken from our air travel. Despite the advice of a number of well intentioned friends in Asia, who reminded us Athens was a notoriously insecure airport, we flew to Athens, the nearest port to Israel. We would be safer, they insisted, if we went to Rome or Frankfurt. Since there have been incidents in all of those airports, I was not quite that sure that it made much difference and since we were flying El Al from Athens to Israel, I felt that we would

be safe. We were told to appear at the airport several hours ahead of departing time for security clearance. I deliberately left our luggage unlocked so that guards could look through everything and make sure that we were not about any fatal mischief. We got to the airport in good time. As we rolled our baggage cart to the El-Al check incounter, we were met by a pleasant woman who asked us several innocuous questions and literally, within two minutes, passed our bags without opening them. I consoled myself that when we entered the special area restricted for Israel bound passengers there would be a close check of our hand baggage and our persons. There was no more security there than you would find at the Cleveland Airport. Our bags were never opened. We were never frisked.

I tried to understand what was involved and the best I could do was to feel that the Israeli security people, and there were a lot of them around, were tired. I equated their actions to soldiers suffering battle fatigue. They had been doing this for months and most of them had come to feel that they could trust their instincts, a decision which gave them the freedom not to go through the prescribed time consuming procedures which is dangerous in the extreme but they had come to believe that they could look me in the eye and somehow know that I was a peaceful Cleveland rabbi and not a terrorist. Battle fatigue can be a killer. When you are tired and have been at it too long you take sometimes fatal chances. Fatigue impairs judgment.

I found this scene in the Athens Airport symptomatic of much that I found in Israel and my single most intense impression is that the whole country desperately needs a vacation. The people have been under the gun for too long. They are tired, and have become a bit careless. Because they are tired they are beginning to make a series of serious judgmental mistakes. You notice these mistakes primarily on the political level but they are happening at all levels of the society.

This tiredness and lack of judgment shows itself in intemperate speech. Over the last weeks there has been serious political discussions

You see it in the little things. Meir Rosenne has been Israel's Ambassador in Washington for the past several years. His normal tour of duty was to end some time in March of this year and he received a letter from the Foreign Office to this effect. Subsequently, he received three letters alternately prolonging and ending his stay. He is still there though Israel has publicly announced three times that he has been recalled.

Diplomatic relationships between Washington and Jerusalem are always critical and now particularly so. There is Irangate, the Pollard affair, the foreign aid budget and the whole question of an international peace conference not to speak of the issue of Soviet policy on Jewish emigration. Yet Israel is represented by a man who has been labeled a lame duck rather than someone who can be the point person in all these negotiations and carry them along. Why the confusion? It turns out that the issue is simply one of partisan politics. According to the ministerial setup of the Israeli government, it is the foreign minister who appoints ambassadors, with the prime minister having the right of advise and consent, and the prime minister who appoints senior officials in the foreign ministry, with the foreign ministry having the right of advise and consent. That is the sum of it. Mr. Peres wants one of his own in Washington. Mr. Shamir is not about to allow that to happen. Mr. Shamir wants one of his own as a senior official in the foreign ministry. Mr. Peres is not about to allow that to happen. Two tired men who have been at the business of government far too long - almost two decades - have somehow lost sight of the larger issue; that Israel needs somebody who is respected and in place in Washington, that no one feels confident dealing with a government whose ambassador is being called every two weeks, told to pack his bags and then told to unpack his bags. Two tired men have lost a measure of the judgment their office requires of them.

This tiredness and lack of judgment shows itself in intemperate speech. Over the last weeks there has been serious political discussions

with the Soviet Union, conducted not only by Israelis but by our Secretary Schultz, about the possibility of bringing out sizable numbers of Refuseniks and others. One of the issues which is caught up in those negotiations is that of their destination, whether they must go to Israel or can be allowed as in the past to choose to come to the United States or elsewhere. One could have one opinion on the matter or another; but clearly, the central issue is to get these people out. If Zionist idealogues want to fight out the Israel-Only issue, let them do so, but in private. Three weeks ago, Mr. Shamir got up at a public meeting and said flat out, "If these people do not come to Israel, this migration has no meaning." The Prime Minister of a Jewish state talks this way if he is tired, if he has been at it so long that he has forgotten that lives are at stake.

In Israel I was often asked about the Demjanjuk affair, obviously because of the Cleveland connection. A number of articles had appeared, including a front page piece in the International Herald Tribune whose general theme was that Ukrainians and Jews were at loggerhead in Cleveland. What were the facts? That issue aside, when I asked Israelis why their government had decided to have this trial, I found few had much of an idea. It was generally felt that the government had decided that it was time to hold a show trial about the Holocaust. Why? Apparently the leadership felt that a generation of young people had grown up since the Second World War for whom the Holocaust was as much ancient history as the pogroms of the last century or the Inquisition. They wanted to keep the truth of the Holocaust alive so their young would better understand the urgency of their state.

This approach explains the way the trial was set up. It is not being held in the courtroom in an established Judicial Center but in the Bihyanei Ha-Uma, Jerusalem's Conference Center, where International meetings of all kinds take place. The conference room where it is held

can seat hundreds. The trial is being televised and carried on radio. Now I confess to a long standing suspicion of show trials. I don't like them. I know that there are times when a show trial may be emotionally necessary. This is true when the issues are larger than the individuals in the docket. Nuremberg was such a trial. So was the Eichmann trial. As the man who had engineered the Final Solution, Eichmann represented the policy of genocide. He was not an official of the ministry which planned and executed the Final Solution. His crime was to have been a sadistic, cruel guard somewhere down the line in one of the minor concentration camps. He was a brute and an animal. But Demjanjuk does not incarnate the issue of the Holocaust. You cannot personify the incredibility of the Holocaust in a trial of a camp guard.

Not surprisingly, the case quickly lost the focus Israel hoped it would have. The defense team did not deny the Holocaust or Nazi atrocities. The trial has focused narrowly, as must any court case, on one issue: Is this man the man the American courts declared him to be or is he, as his defense lawyer claims, somebody who has been unfortunately misidentified. So day after day the Israeli media reports long court sessions which deal with such issues as whether or not a particular hand writing expert is competent to give testimony - two days were taken up on that issue - or whether a particular Russian or Polish document had been translated correctly into English and Hebrew. There have been tedious debates over whether a particular picture can be accepted as evidence or whether the judge should accept documents from the Russian archives because Russia is known to practice disinformation.

When it ends, Israel will face a difficult decision over the issue of punishment. This man is clearly a low level type not worthy of notoriety even in death. Moreover it is now clear that after the trial a spate of books will be written by those who make money off this kind of thing, designed to prove Demjanuk was not Ivan the Terrible but a victim. I am confident that the American courts proved who he was beyond a shadow

of a doubt, but given a case of this type a clever ~~advocate~~ advocate can always make a seemingly plausible contrary brief. Unfortunately, because people will make money off of such exposes and segments of the community will want to believe that he was railroaded, Israel's justice system will be held up for suspicion and in many eyes will be suspect since after all the decision was made to handle this case as a show trial. Hindsight suggests that whoever made the decision to accept Demjanjuk once the United States had extradited him, acted too swiftly and made a serious error of judgment ~~and~~ and did so, I believe, because of tiredness and fixated on old problems of again age and fatigue. Many think so.

In January of 1986, the Spanish government finally established diplomatic relationships with Israel and ten days ago Israel's Foreign Minister, Mr. Peres, went to Spain for the first visit by an Israeli Foreign Minister. Peres spent most of his time talking to Senor Gonzales, his Spanish counterpart, about his interest in bringing about an international conference on peace in the Middle East. A day later, the Prime Minister of Israel sent a letter to Senor Gonzales saying that the Israeli government was opposed to such a conference, which it was felt would be counterproductive rather than helpful. When Mr. Gonzales appeared at a press conference he understandably said, "It is hard to understand what the Israeli government has in mind." Moshe Dinitz, who many of you have heard and met, Israel's former ambassador to the United States, was asked by reporters the other day: "Could you make clear to us Israel's position on the peace conference?" He smiled sweetly and said simply, "I can't."

No government can operate successfully as Israel is doing at the moment. A government must have clear policies in its relations with the world. Israel's coalition government does not. To be effective domestically a government needs to articulate a vision the country can rally

behind. The government's failure to do so only compounds the deep division which exists within the country.

You see evidence of this lack of judgment and tiredness in many places. The Pollard affair, I understand, has united American Jews in the feeling that this entire episode represents disastrous judgment and planning. Many Israelis would not agree with that part of the charge which sees as necessarily a miscalculation, Israel's engagement in spying activities in the United States. Their argument is based on the claim that all countries spy on all other countries. England spies on the United States. United States spies on England. They point to the news that the C.I.A. was involved in the Harold Wilson affair. They ask why if America is, as she claims, such a close ally of Israel's she withheld the kind of material that Pollard delivered, information which directly affected the security of Israel. In the jungle called international relationships they insist every country has the right to go after any information which will enhance its security. You may accept that argument or not. But having said that, the Israelis I met were unanimous in condemning the judgment of their government as these were reflected in the way the affair was handled once it broke into the open. Why, they asked, did Jerusalem not return all of the documents which had been taken? America has all the originals. Why anger Washington by keeping anything back? Why did Jerusalem promote the Air Force general who had been the man behind Pollard when it was clear this would only inflame relations with the United States? Why did not Jerusalem make it clear to America, through diplomatic and other channels? America has no right to assume that her representative can investigate freely into Secret Service matters in Israel. Israel's intensity was at stake, but Israel, to make this point, had to be forthcoming with information the United States had a right to have. An effective internal investigation should have been organized. This was not done. Jerusalem did not make its legal position clear nor was the commission that was appointed given the

mandate it required. For two weeks while we were in Israel six of the eight members of a cabinet commission dealing with phases of this problem were out of the country, including its chairman, Abba Eban, who was busy in the United States promoting a rerun of his Heritage television series.

Most Israelis agree with American Jews that the handling of the fallout from the Pollard ^{affair} was more than unfortunate. Israel did not make its legal position clear and did not draw lines when the American government tried to assume they could act as if Israel was the 51st state rather than an independent country. I don't know if you saw the other day the report that when Vice President Bush went to Israel some months ago he paid a courtesy call on President Herzog. Before the visit his security people tried to enter the President's office to make sure that it was safe. Herzog finally had to say to these people: "When I go to Washington we don't send Israeli agents into the White House to make sure that it is secure."

Israel can't go on vacation, but the Israelis desperately want a change. I found Israel suffering a bad case of political inertia, lacking a uniform political vision and splitting more and more into camps at loggerheads with each other over such issues as the West Bank, the roll of the religious, civil rights and the like. They know that things are heating up on the Northern border. While we were in Israel the first Katyusha in seven years landed in Israel proper and for the first time in five years guerillas penetrated the border fence. They were shot, but they managed to get through into Israel proper. It was clear to everyone that the Syrian movement into the Lebanon has forced terrorist groups south and that to justify themselves they would try to increase their level of military action against Israel.

Most Israelis I talk to want to be relieved of the tired old men whose judgment they no longer trust and that included Shamir, Peres and

Rabin. They want a clean slate, and they have no idea how this can be achieved. The coalition government will fall, but what next? More of the same. A new election would leave Labor or Likud with about the same proportion of votes all with slates headed by the same figures. Whoever forms a government would have to pay off the ultra Orthodox. Israel's political system guarantees that kind of result. The two major parties are simply too evenly balanced.

The press is filled with various proposals for electoral reform, some way to get new faces and new parties into the political game. The most popular of these propositions suggests electing eighty of the one hundred and twenty members of the Knesset on a regional basis. Presently all are elected at large. If this were done local politicians who have their own support base could be elected, build up followings and ultimately achieve power. I don't know if that is the best system or not, but at this point Israelis would like any kind of change which gives them hope of a change. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that a new electoral system will come into being. There are too many vested interests involved in the present system. The old men won't give up. Those who have paid their dues for thirty years and who will be the next old men are not about to give up their seats.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that Israel is a disaster area. It is not. The economy is stronger than it has been in a long, long time. Inflation is as much under control in Israel as it is in the United States. Israel's foreign reserves are the highest they have been in over thirty years. 4.3 billion. Five hundred million dollars of capital investment were made in Israel in the first quarter of this last year. It is estimated that Israel's gross domestic product will increase this year by 5%, a healthy increase. There is a sense that the economic problems which led to the formation of the coalition government have been handled.

windows and balcony looked out over the walls of the old city.

Tedd But everyone recognizes that this has happened at a cost. An austerity budget is in place which hits particularly at education, social welfare, the integration of new immigrants, hospitals, medical care and the like. This coming year the Hebrew University will have to release eight hundred senior people, five hundred staff and three hundred faculty. Not only will many individuals suffer but for years the University will not be able to make new faculty appointments. The staff will age. Fresh Future leaders will go elsewhere. Whole departments will disappear. There is talk of needing to increase tuition costs from their present level of \$1,300 to about \$2,000. To an American parent paying Ivy League tuitions such changes do not sound excessive, but for an Israeli family whose median income is much, much lower than here, such dollars are not easy to come by and probably simply not available. There were student strikes while we were in Israel. Inevitably such a rise in cost as the one proposed will set back efforts to bring the other Israel, the majority Israel, into the main stream. The Oriental families are precisely those who have the least money and are least able to send their children to the Universities.

These problems are not unique to Israel. The world's economy is going through a difficult period of structural changes. Israel is a little further along in it than we are. But the fact that there is company in misery does not change the facts. In Israel today jobs are not easy to come by. Some of the current yeridah is happening among groups who would not normally leave, but who now have no other financially viable alternative. There are no jobs in many of the disciplines in which young people have been trained and trained well by Israeli universities.

Jerusalem is a joy. We came to Jerusalem as spring burst on the city. The weather was glorious. We were given an apartment whose front

windows and balcony looked out over the walls of the old city.

Teddy Kollek's parks have now coalesced and the ancient beauty in the Old City is majestically set off against an omnipresent sense of green, of nature. The architectural redo of the Jewish quarter of the Old City has been successfully completed. The Old City is clean. There is a sense of change that the city has for the better. Not all is bleak and people seem to realize that their problems are political and, as such to a degree, manageable. Politicians can be gotten ride of. Fresh work and ideas can be brought to the fore.

We went to Seder in a way I have never been to Seder before, walking along a street the other side of the hill which looks out at the walls of the Old City under a full moon. The city was quiet. The only people we saw were others like ourselves, haggadahs in hand, walking to a friend's house for Seder. As we walked we sensed that which is unique to Jerusalem, to Israel, something of that which is eternal. I felt I was participating in a holiday of deliverance which had been celebrated in that city for the best part of 3,000 years and that it would be celebrated there for another 3,000. As we made our way I received the shot of spiritual adrenalin which being in Israel provides. It was not only the Seder, a lovely, warm, intimate service; it was the setting.

Jerusalem. I don't know how long Jews will be in Cleveland. I was in many places in Asia which had had long established Jewish communities but no longer. But I am absolutely convinced that the promise of God in our scripture is true. That year in and year out Jews will be able to say confidently, "Next year in Jerusalem."

I hope some of you will have the great pleasure of being there for Pesach next year.

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