

INTO THE BREACH?

by Lawrence Meyer

Thirty-five years have passed since the establishment of the State of Israel. The novelty of a Jewish state has long since worn off. The world has become accustomed to its existence, and the memory of the reasons for its creation is fading.

Theodor Herzl believed that a Jewish state would end the anomalous position of Jews in the world. The wonder and elation that Jews once felt at seeing Jewish policemen, farmers, laborers, soldiers, pilots, porters, and waiters working in their own country have largely disappeared. In this respect, Israel has fulfilled Herzl's dream of making the Jews a "normal" people. Israel has Jewish scientists and criminals, Jewish professors and prostitutes, Jewish soldiers and statesmen, Jewish tax collectors, Jewish soccer and movie stars. A whole generation of Israelis has grown up without experiencing the humiliations of anti-Semitism. "When I hear the phrase 'dirty Jew,'" an Israeli once told me, "my first impulse is to think I need a shower."

For purposes of comparison and perspective, it is useful to remember that Israel is roughly at that point in her history where the United States was when Andrew Jackson occupied the White House. Socially, economically, and politically, Israel is still grappling with difficulties that have confronted the state since its inception. These problems, however serious, are relatively minor when viewed against the malaise and lost sense of purpose that have afflicted Israelis during the past decade. The failure of Israel's recent leaders to articulate any sort of national vision, the transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society, the shift from group to individual values—all of these changes have stirred unease among a people who once took strength from the idea that they were part of an historic, even spiritual, adventure.

No longer do the Israelis perceive themselves as bold pioneers, braving poverty and adversity as they settled the land and made the desert bloom. The idealism, self-sacrifice, and abstemious living that marked the nation's early years have been displaced in a new generation by consumerism and a proclivity toward "looking out for No. 1." Far from being independent and self-sufficient (as David Ben-Gurion and other Zionists had hoped it would become), Israel today must rely on the largesse of the United States—not for economic development

but to underwrite the very comfortable standard of living the nation could otherwise not afford. In a way, the life of Israel parallels that of her greatest ruler, King David, who rose from humble poet and shepherd to great warrior and conqueror of Jerusalem, and then succumbed to the temptations of the flesh.

The Jewish state was created, among other reasons, to restore the Jewish people to the family of nations. Here, too, the results after three decades have been disappointing. The image of Israel as a just and humane society has lately given way to a more dismal perception of the country—both at home and abroad—as an occupier and oppressor, denying to Palestinian Arabs what Israeli Jews so passionately sought for themselves. Israel has thus become more and more isolated in the world community.

Sensing their isolation, the Israelis have begun to view themselves as pariahs, concluding with some justice that whatever good they may do is deemed irrelevant while even the smallest ill is judged with merciless scrupulosity. "Where Israel is concerned, the world swells with moral consciousness," novelist Saul Bellow has written. "What Switzerland is to winter holidays and the Dalmatian coast to summer tourists, Israel and the Palestinians are to the West's need for justice—a sort of moral resort area." The nation's response has been to harden its position, to assume a pugnacious stance.

Without a doubt, the world Israel inhabits today is far less hopeful and expectant than it was in the era after World War II when the state was established. But the change of outlook within Israel cannot be attributed merely to the "end of innocence." For all of the fresh-faced optimism of Israel during its early years, the Israelis had already learned firsthand, in a bitter war for independence that followed the greatest slaughter of a single people in history, what sort of world they lived in. Still, Israel held out the promise that, in its dealings with its neighbors and with its own citizens, it could tread a path between meekness and arrogance, irresolution and intransigence. As the Israeli intellectual Yehoshafat Harkabi has written, until the heady triumph of the Six Day War in 1967 "Israel insisted on

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Olive Trees, by Israeli artist Aharon Halevy.

keeping to the realistic, middle way, taking pride in its capabilities but never losing sight of its limitations. That is why it accepted partition [in 1948], and when there was no way out even retreat. Its leaders were fully aware of the dangers of rising above reality and losing touch with it."

The question that arises today is whether Israel is still determined to pursue that middle course. The question is not rhetorical. Although the fact is not fully appreciated by the world outside, Israel *has* paid a considerable price—economically and psychologically, if not strategically—to secure peace with Egypt. In their own minds, Israelis see themselves taking a large, calculated risk in order to accomplish their ultimate goal: achieving peace with their neighbors.

Yet the sense of a transcending higher purpose that once motivated Israel seems to be succumbing to a simple urge for territorial possession. Dressing that urge up in historical-religious verbiage, as the present government has done, cannot disguise Israel's apparent intention to impose her will and rule on more than one million reluctant subjects. Whether Israelis have fully reckoned the cost of this enterprise is not clear. "When the white man turns tyrant," George Orwell wrote of his own experience with colonialism, "it is his own freedom he destroys. . . . For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend

his life in trying to impress the 'natives,' and so in every crisis he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it."

The other nations of the Middle East, of course, indulge in rhetoric and actions far more severe and extreme than anything Israel says or does. But Israel alone among the countries of the region is a member of the family of Western democracies—democracies that were present at Israel's creation and from which Israel now risks estrangement. In an odd way, some Israelis may welcome that prospect; among a broad section of the populace a kind of bunker mentality has already set in. In place of the values shared by the leaders of the prestate and early poststate era—in place of Ben-Gurion's vision of Israel as a "light unto the nations"—one finds increasingly a narrow nationalism, a new tribalism.

The notion of a fortress Israel, though appealing to some, raises the possibility also of seige and obliteration. Such an eventuality is not without historical precedent. In the first century A.D., the Jewish people in Israel revolted against the Romans. The rebellion was put down. Fleeing Jerusalem after its fall and the destruction of the Second Temple, almost 1,000 religious zealots made their way to the mountaintop fortress of Masada where they managed to keep a Roman army at bay for more than a year. Finally, faced with defeat, capture, and slavery or death, they elected to commit mass suicide. In all, 960 men, women, and children perished.

As an inspiration to an infant country fighting for its very life, the legend of Masada served Israel well. But different times call for different responses. There is also virtue in survival, in distinguishing between the essential and the desirable, in rejoicing in history rather than seeking to repeat it. Chaim Weizmann, Israel's first President, composed this parting admonition on his deathbed: "We are a small people," he said, "but a great people. An ugly and yet a beautiful people. A creative and a destructive people. A people in whom genius and folly are equally commingled. We are an impetuous people who time and again repudiated and wrecked what our ancestors built. For God's sake, let us not allow the breach in the wall to swallow us."