

I grew up with the State of Israel, being all of five years old on that Friday afternoon in May, 1948 when Israel's Declaration of Independence was signed and read. What a thrill it was for me six years ago to visit Israel's Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, the site of that momentous event. Growing up, my family was hardly what one would call ardently Zionist, nor were they major donors, but our support of and concern for Israel were a given. We sang Hatikvah as part of our Friday night ritual, disdained anti-Zionists, whether from the ultra-Reform American Council for Judaism or the ultra-Orthodox *Neturei Karta*, and were cheered by Israel's victory in the Sinai campaign of 1956. When I attended Hebrew-speaking camp in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania during my teen years, much of the focus of the program was on Israeli culture. Some of my peers from Hebrew High School and College were members of the Labor Zionist youth movement *Habonim* and were planning to make *aliyah*, when they completed their education. The Six Day War of 1967, a turning point in the relationship of American Jews to Israel, occurred at the conclusion of my third year of study at Seminary. I can recall the anxiety and fright I felt when President Nasser of Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, dismissed the UN peacekeeping forces, and sent his troops into the Sinai. I remember being glued to radio and TV for the entire week of the war and feeling elated but mainly relieved by Israel' stunning victory and by her averting the fate that her enemies had intended for her.

My first visit to Israel was for my junior year of Seminary, which I spent studying at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I arrived for the beginning of the scholastic year in October, 1967, four short months after the end of the war. On the very day of my arrival in Jerusalem, I went to the Western Wall and felt moved to be standing at the site, sacred to so many generations of Jews. My fourth trip will be next month, when, along with Nancy and other members of the Springfield Jewish community, I will be attending the General Assembly of the Jewish Federations of North America. The GA will be held in Tel Aviv this year in order for the Federation movement to mark and to celebrate Israel's 70th anniversary. The theme is "We need to talk", which hints at some of the strains and tensions in the current relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jews. But more about that later. The beginning of Israel's eighth decade of independence and the New Year season of self-examination make this an appropriate time for reflecting on Israel's past and present, on concerns as well as achievements, and on our own relationship to Israel.

The first years of Israel's existence were a time of *tzena*, austerity, as a country with few natural resources and a large portion of her territory consisting of desert struggled to absorb hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors from the DP camps and refugees from the Arab and Muslim world. Runaway inflation, economic volatility, and the stifling effects on business initiative of government bureaucracy were problems for the Israeli economy that were not overcome until the 1980's and '90's. Today's Israel is a pioneer in scientific research and digital technology and a leading participant in the 21st century high-tech economy and enjoys a level of prosperity unimaginable in the 1950's. The one negative is that, as in other advanced high-tech economies, the benefits of prosperity have not been spread to the entire population; the persistence in Israel of poverty and of a high measure of inequality are unfortunate realities.

For six months preceding independence, armed conflict raged between Jews and local Arab forces determined to strangle the Jewish state before birth. On the day that statehood was declared, Israel was invaded by the armies of five neighboring Arab states, and her ability to survive was hanging in the balance. Ultimately, Israel did prevail and even managed to expand her territory beyond the borders of the 1947 Partition Plan, but victory came at a high cost, with 6,000 Israelis dying in the conflict (1% of the population). In the ensuing seven decades, Israel's military, equipped with American armaments and weaponry as well as those produced by her own arms industry, has become one of the strongest and most capable in the world and could today handily defeat any of the regular armies in the region. Like her economy, Israel's military prowess and security far exceed the situation that prevailed in the early years of her existence. Israel's current prosperity and security are, given the harsh realities of Middle East politics, a wonderful achievement and perhaps a miracle as well, to be celebrated alongside the miracle of a dispersed and persecuted people's rebirth in its ancient homeland after 2000 years.

Military might does not, however, preclude a sense of vulnerability, which Israelis do indeed feel and justifiably so. A brutal civil war in Syria on Israel's northern border has taken half a million lives. The situation is complicated by the presence in Syria of Russian forces, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, all of whom operate in support of President Assad, even as they pursue their own independent agendas. As one military analyst has noted, the Russian presence has made it necessary for Israel to adjust its "red lines", its military doctrine of what it will and will not tolerate in regard to Syria and Syrian territory.

Hezbollah, possessing in its armory upwards of 100,000 rockets, some capable of reaching Israel's major population centers, is particularly menacing. The 2006 Lebanon war, when Hezbollah had fewer rockets and with much shorter ranges, caused 44 Israeli civilian deaths and over a thousand wounded and was highly disruptive to Israel's economy.

In Gaza on Israel's southwestern border, the Islamist movement Hamas has ruled since 2007, and, under the influence of a virulently anti-Israel and anti-Semitic ideology, is Israel's sworn enemy. Rocket attacks from Gaza have been a recurrent feature of life in border kibbutzim and communities. Over the years, Hamas has found other ways as well of threatening the life and livelihood of Israelis, including (in the months preceding hostilities in 2014) tunnels underneath the border intended to facilitate a surprise attack on Israel and, in recent days, incendiary kites dispatched into Israeli fields with the purpose of destroying crops. Hostilities flare up from time to time and, on occasion, the cycles of attack and reprisal erupt into full-scale warfare. Last month, as I was beginning to compose these remarks, war was averted by a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas that was brokered by Egypt and the United Nations, but full-scale conflict remains an ever-present danger, exacerbated by the extreme poverty, deprivation and hopelessness within Gaza. Within Israel itself terrorist bombings seem to have abated, but they have been replaced by car ramming and knifings as the terrorist's weapons of choice. Adding to the sense of vulnerability is the BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) movement, less because of its effectiveness as a tactic and more because it questions the very legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state. And, lurking in the background is the threat of Iran's developing a nuclear weapon; how that threat will be impacted by the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear pact remains to be seen.

On the diplomatic front Israel, supported by a sympathetic administration in Washington and maintaining under-the-radar contacts with Arab regimes that are far more agitated by Iran's geopolitical ambitions in the region than by the plight of the Palestinians (to which they pay no more than lip service), feels relatively little pressure to pursue a peace settlement that would involve painful concessions. Israel's political left and center seem to be in disarray and offer, at present, no credible alternatives to the current coalition. Even veteran advocates of the two-state solution now despair of its being attainable at any time in the near future. Trust between Palestinians and Israelis is at a low, and President Abbas alienated many on the Israeli left with

his intemperate and anti-Semitic remarks in reaction to the U.S. transfer of its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

General prosperity and economic stability and growth (though accompanied by lingering problems of poverty and inequality) and security (tempered by a sense of vulnerability) are among the accomplishments to be celebrated on the occasion of Israel's 70th anniversary. They represent the positive side of the ledger. But at this season of taking stock, when merits and shortcomings are weighed in the balance, it is incumbent on us to note the negatives as well. Criticism, it should be noted, is not a mark of hostility nor of betrayal, and can be a reflection of love and concern.

The nation-state law, hastily passed by Israel's Knesset this summer, was an unnecessary and gratuitous measure that played straight into the hands of Israel's enemies. Very little, if anything, was actually changed by the enactment of the law, but it was insulting and demeaning to members of Israel's minority communities, who include not only Muslim Arabs, but also Arab Christians, Circassians and Bedouin. The Druze, who have been unswervingly loyal to Israel, serving in the Israel Defense Forces and dying for the country, were particularly humiliated and outraged and did not hesitate to voice their displeasure. The nation-state law omits mention of the word "equality" and repudiates the ideals of Israel's Declaration of Independence, which promises equal rights to all, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity. We often invoke the mantra of a state that is both Jewish and democratic, but the nation-state law sets an unfortunate precedent for future jurists, when they will be deciding cases, to privilege the Jewishness of the state over the preservation of its democracy. Apologists for the law have cited the numerous countries in the Muslim world, and also in central and Eastern Europe, whose constitutions accord privileged status to a particular religious or ethnic group. I believe such arguments are setting a very low bar for ourselves and that our aspirations should extend higher. One does not have to come from the left side of the political spectrum to be disturbed by the law, and some of the more outspoken critics of Israel's strident nationalism and its turn toward authoritarianism are representatives of the old Likud – Israel's President, Ruvi Rivlin, former defense minister Moshe Arens, and former Knesset member Benny Begin, all three security hawks and territorial maximalists but strong upholders of democratic ideals and values. Ronald Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, who more than anyone is responsible for Prime Minister

Netanyahu's entry into the Israeli political arena and who has a strong record of pro-Israel activism, expressed the same concerns in a New York Times op-ed titled "This Is Not Who We Are"

No issue has been more upsetting to Diaspora Jews than the vexed subject of religion and state. The power of the ultra-Orthodox political parties is based on their ability in Israel's parliamentary system (where no single party has ever held a majority of seats in the Knesset) to make or break a ruling coalition. It was pressure from the ultra-Orthodox that led the Prime Minister to renege on a commitment to provide an enlarged and re-modeled space for egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall and also on a promise to support surrogate parenthood for gay couples. Additionally, control over conversion to Judaism was given over to the ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate, which has taken a highly restrictive and stringent approach to the process of becoming Jewish. As a consequence, many Israelis (particularly from the former Soviet Union), who are regarded by *halacha* as non-Jews but are willing to undergo conversion, have been left in limbo. The most egregious infringement on religious freedom in recent months was the arrest and detention of a Conservative rabbi in Haifa for performing a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony that was not authorized by the rabbinate.

The trend to authoritarianism is exemplified by attacks on the press and attempts to manipulate it, endeavoring to curtail the ability of the judiciary to review legislation, equating dissent and criticism with treason, and imposing restrictions on NGO's, non-governmental organizations, that monitor human rights. Most concerning have been the detentions and interrogations by Israel's security services at Ben-Gurion Airport. There are, of course, security concerns regarding who is allowed to enter the country, but many of the incidents seem to be blatantly political in motivation and intended to target dissenters and critics rather than legitimate security threats. The detention of Meyer Koplow, chairman of the board of Brandeis University, would be laughable if it were not so distressing. He is an Orthodox Jew and a major donor to Israel, but was detained because he had attended an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue group and had in his baggage a brochure he had been given titled "This Week in Palestine."

Some of this is not unprecedented. Ben-Gurion also used the Shin Bet for the purpose of harassing political enemies, and Israeli Arabs were subjected to military rule for the first eighteen years of Israel's existence, until 1966. But what makes the current situation particularly

troubling is that it's part of a pattern whereby the governing coalition has significantly transformed Israel and eroded its democracy. Particularly telling is Israel's developing alliance with the "illiberal democracies" of central Europe – Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – whose authoritarianism, disdain for ethnic minorities, and troubling inability to confront and acknowledge their own history during the Shoah are overlooked or minimized, because they support Israeli policies and utter no criticism of either settlements or the occupation of the West Bank. You don't always get to pick your allies, and sometimes you have to accept the hand of friendship, even when the person extending it has a tarnished reputation. But I still find the association with the extreme nationalism of Hungary's Viktor Orban or the Polish Law and Justice Party's Lech Kaczynski to be distressing. Is Israel's friendship with them a convenience based on the desire for expanding trade and commercial ties and the need for support at the UN and other international forums, or are the "illiberal democracies" a model for what Israel is going to become?

The achievements I've enumerated have been a source of pride, but the concerns of which I spoke have contributed to widening the gap between Israel and American Jews. Young Jews who are now in their teens, twenties and early thirties did not grow up with Israel as I did. They have no recollection of an embattled and poor country struggling to defend its independence and develop its economy. A Birthright trip may help forge and solidify a connection to Israel, but our young people are also vulnerable on campus to a barrage of anti-Israel activism and propaganda, much of it malicious in tone and intent and reckless with the truth, sometimes crossing the border into outright anti-Semitism. Israel makes an effort to refute the hostile propaganda, but no amount of *hasbara*, of public relations, can convincingly justify the nation-state law, a repressive religious establishment that undercuts the Jewish pluralism that American Jews cherish, or the deployment of security services to stifle dissenting and critical voices. On many of these issues non-Orthodox American Jews feel that our concerns are being ignored or disregarded by the Israeli government. It's true that we do not vote or pay taxes in Israel, we don't serve in the Israeli military, and we are not subject to the risks that Israelis confront, of terrorism and armed conflict, so our opinions should not carry the same weight as those of the Israeli electorate. On the other hand, we are asked for our political and financial support; and there is an irony that Israel, which now claims to be the nation-state of the Jewish

people, is at odds on these issues with a significant percentage of the American Jewish population and the values they espouse.

The tensions, incidentally, are not new. They go back to the 1940's and '50's and the negotiations between David Ben-Gurion and my fellow Baltimorean, Jacob Blaustein, who was president of the American Jewish Committee. Also to be noted is the ways that Jewish identity in Israel and Jewish identity in the Diaspora differ from each other, which may explain some of our disagreements and some of the strains in our relationship. In America, Jews are a religious minority that thrives and flourishes in a pluralistic society. Our Jewishness, moreover, is voluntarily chosen and individual in character. In Israel, Jews are an ethnic and religious majority, and Jewishness is understood as non-voluntary and collective.

This is a season of reconciliation, of closing the gaps and distances that separate us from God and from our fellow persons. I am hopeful that the General Assembly which Nancy and I will be attending next month and that is devoted to the theme "Let's Talk", will be an occasion for respectful, honest and productive dialogue and that it will encourage similar efforts to narrow the gap between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. Israelis and Diaspora Jews benefit each other in so many ways and have much to learn from each other. The severance of that relationship would be an irreparable loss for both. May the coming year bring us closer together and heal our rifts. May the miracle of Israel reborn and the miracle of today's Israel, so strong both economically and militarily, lead not to complacency and satisfaction with the status quo but rather to renewed effort to live up to the democratic and humanitarian ideals of Israel's founders and of its founding charter.