

THE STATE OF THE JEWISH NATION -- 5770

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We made it through another year, another nasty war (Hamas was the nasty one, notwithstanding the crude Goldstone/NGO propaganda), another election, six months of another Netanyahu premiership, and our share of the global economic meltdown. And we are still here, more or less intact. This in itself is a cause for some celebration, tempered by the requisite introspection of the High Holy Days and period of repentance for our sins.

In truth, our basic problems – Israel's and the Jewish nation's -- still have not been solved, and progress, if any, is slow. We keep buying time, and, like the wise men and women of Chelm, spend most of this expensive time in profound debate with each other. The essential Jewish question– “Nu?” – remains, as does the standard answer – “nu, nu.”

Maybe this is the best we can realistically hope for under the difficult circumstances. Iran looms very large as we enter the New Year – another “year of decision”, likely to see either a military strike and the uncertain consequences that result, or accommodation with Iran's fanatical leaders, armed with nuclear weapons. Hope comes from the unhappiness of many young Iranians who have had enough of the Islamic dictatorship, but this may not be enough to prevent a blow-up.

On the issue of war and peace, polls show that most Israelis are wary of messianic “solutions” and resigned to small steps that may result in less violence, or the reverse. In contrast, Diaspora Jewry on both the Left and Right appear to be stuck in the 1990s, (some are still in the '60s), fighting the Oslo wars long after that experiment failed, and the reality of Arab rejectionism and violence returned. Unlike the J-street crowd, Israelis are not impressed by Obama's smooth rhetoric or frightened into submission by unsubtle pressure.

But this does not mean there is much support for settlement expansion – this is also a relic of earlier decades, and is confined to a small but very vocal minority. If there is a realistic alternative to the status quo, most Israelis would grab it, in order to end the damage resulting from the daily friction with the Palestinians, and the threat to the Jewish and democratic framework. So Netanyahu knows that he needs to walk close to the center of the political map.

Similarly, this pragmatic Zionism and the ongoing challenges of building a functioning Jewish society dominate the domestic area. Few Israelis stop to consider the amazing accomplishment of successfully absorbing over one million refugees from the former Soviet Union – one fifth of the population – in less than twenty years. This is not to deny the ongoing challenges, as well as the additional ones posed by the much smaller aliyah of Ethiopian Jews, but when placed in perspective, Israel has done well in this and other areas.

At the same time, there is still a long way to go in rebuilding a thriving Jewish society in Israel. 61 years is a very short time in the history of the Jewish people, and there is a long way to go. We are still grappling with the issues of religion and state, and have not yet figured out the best role for rabbis, particularly those demanding the unlimited authority the rabbinical leadership often enjoyed in the Diaspora.

Other social issues will continue to provide challenges for Israelis and Jews from abroad who decide to play a role in this historic process. Environmental consciousness in Israel is still far from the levels of North America and Europe, and the damage in our small country is much greater. (One of the failures of Diaspora activists like the New Israel Fund is the diversion of money into fringe politics instead of recycling and similar policies.) It is true that the security situation and the constant threat of war and terror tend to divert energies from other issues, but the damage grows as a result, and much of it is irreversible.

In summary, Israel has plenty to atone for, but also some serious achievements to celebrate. Perhaps not a country like every other country, as Herzl had envisioned for the Jewish State and "Old/New Land", but far less problematic than the chorus of critics claim. While we need to continue to respond to challenges, there are also important achievements to celebrate as we enter the Jewish year 5770.

Shana tova to all.

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