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## ISRAEL, TORAH AND I: MUSINGS OF A PERMANENT RESIDENT

The article written by my friend and colleague, Emanuel Feldman, in the Fall 1975 issue of *TRADITION*\* troubled me. He spoke the truth. But it was not the whole truth! He did not misrepresent the facts in describing the secular orientation of great sectors of the population, but the picture that emerged from his description is distorted and terribly wrong!

Before proceeding to discuss the issues in greater detail, let me state unequivocally that I am not among those who think that the government of Israel, its institutions or even its people are beyond criticism by Diaspora Jewry. I believe Diaspora Jewry has this right, even duty, not because it contributes money to Israel and provides political support, but because what is done here has serious implications for Diaspora Jewry. The policies that are set here and the quality of Jewish life that emerges here in Israel determine the fate not only of Israelis, but in a far broader sense of world Jewry. That is why Israeli leaders have a responsibility to listen to the views of their brethren overseas.

It has, however, become fashionable during the last few years for some Jewish leaders in the Diaspora publicly to step up their criticism of Israel even in areas that touch upon security and defense, to question the role of the State in the worldwide survival of Jews and Judaism, and to rationalize the disassociation of the fate of Israel from the fate of world Jewry. This is being

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done by people who until a few years ago did not think that way. *Lo ha b'ha talya*, they have begun to say.

This questioning has been coming from two different directions. Those for whom Torah is not the center of their universe began a renewed emphasis on the Diaspora as a viable alternative to Israel. Inasmuch as *Eretz Yisrael* is not central to their religious *weltanschauung*, Judaism and the Jewish people could manage without it, Israel is important, but not *that* important. They insist they have a choice, a *breirah*.

The others are those for whom Torah *is* the center of their universe and in whose religious *weltanschauung* therefore *Eretz Yisrael* *must* play a role. Some of these circles have long pointed to the imperfections of Israeli society and to the secular aspects of the State to downgrade the theological significance of the restoration of *Medinat Yisrael*. The active resettlement of *Eretz Yisrael* to hasten the redemption and the attempt to reestablish a sovereign state is an old historical struggle that I don't intend to elaborate upon here. It's a battle that was waged by the Vilner Gaon, by Zvi Hirsch Kalisher and by Harav Kook and their disciples long before there was a Jewish state.

But now along come others from our own ranks, pointing to these same imperfections and flaws, to question whether we can count on Divine Providence to assure the survival of the State of Israel, to question whether a Jewishly imperfect society such as ours deserves the blessings of this unique land.

"Have we earned the right to live in God's land?" asks Emanuel Feldman.

In the fullness of time, the land spews out that which is offensive to it . . . The same Torah which promises Israel's return to her ancestral land also promises that this Land cannot endure profaneness. Is it not possible that the same God Who before our very eyes is fulfilling the first may also choose, once again, to fulfill the second?

Of course it is always possible . . . just as it is always possible that the same God may turn His face away once again to tolerate another holocaust. Yet both possibilities are equally so horrendous that to conceive of God tolerating another *hurban* along either direction and to articulate it publicly is to destroy faith and not encourage it.

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As a matter of fact, if the secular conditions of this land pose a Divine threat, if they foreshadow a loss of grace, a condition of keeping the commandments on the part of everyone is no guarantee either.

It is interesting to note at this point the reasons given by the Sages for the destruction of the Temples.

Why was the first Temple destroyed? Because of three sins which then prevailed: idolatry, immorality, bloodshed . . . But why was the second Temple destroyed, considering that in its time the people were occupying themselves with Torah, were keeping the commandments, and were extending charity to their fellow men? They sought and found the answer. Because there was causeless hatred (of fellow Jews). And which reason is graver? Let the length of the destruction prove it . . . This teaches you that causeless hatred is considered of even greater gravity than the three sins of idolatry, immorality and bloodshed together (*Yoma* 9b).

If I were to try to pinpoint the causes that might raise the specter of a renewal of Divine anger and retribution, I would be far more concerned with the prevalence of causeless hatred, *sinat hinam*, among the different elements of our own people than with any other single factor. From what has been said by the Sages, the Almighty is far less forgiving of this sin than of any other.

Feldman is not wrong in his description of the various bankruptcies — moral, ethical, educational (one could have also added economic) to which Israeli secularism has led. But neither is he right, for the picture is not balanced. The “strong pockets of Jewish idealism . . . those raised on Torah where the love of Zion is an integral part,” that Feldman acknowledges exist in Israel, are more than pockets. They are a highly visible, highly vocal part of the nation. Many, and not only religious Jews, see them as the heart of the nation. They are a force to be reckoned with. Furthermore, let no one think that a critique of Israel’s secularist bankruptcy comes only from religious circles and can be found only in journals of Orthodox Jewish thought. Such questioning is today emanating also from secularist circles, where serious inner struggle and *heshbon hanefesh* are in progress, where past errors are being admitted and critical evaluations

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are discussed.

Had the brunt of Feldman's criticism not been directed at "Israel" in general (there are too many faces of Israel for such a critique to be a totally accurate picture), but at specific views of specific leaders or parties; had he called upon them to acknowledge the ultimate aims of this nation, to be an *or lagoyim*, a *mamleket kohanim*, that they fulfill the spiritual hunger of Israeli youth and thereby also prevent *yeridah* by sabras, that they be true to Jewish national destiny — I would have been the first to throw bouquets.

What was disturbing to me, and assuredly discouraging to others, was the sense of pessimism, of loss of faith in the future, that permeated the valid criticisms. What was wrong was in seeing the whole picture as one inviting Divine retribution. I don't know what impact it had on Israeli leaders to mend their ways, but it undoubtedly served to instill doubt and fear among Torah Jews in the Diaspora concerning the future of Israel.

Breirah's disenchantment with Israel smacks of classical Reform theology. The disenchantment in some Orthodox circles may be expressed in terms of Torah, but *halom ehad hu*, it is one dream, reflecting the same unfortunate despair that gripped the Jewish people, here and abroad, after October, 1973. While the Yom Kippur War ended as a brilliant military victory, even far more significant and awesome than the lightning success of the Six Day War, it was a psychological and political disaster for Israel. It caused a pendulum-like shift in the Jewish mood. The too-many needless losses on the battlefield caused by *me-hdalim* (Israeli snafus) created bitterness, anger and sorrow. All of this led to gnawing self-doubts and much self-criticism. Some of it was healthy and constructive to the long-range health of this nation; some of it was neurotic and damaging. The unwarranted arrogance and unbecoming haughtiness that infected this nation (and Diaspora Jewry too) after June 1967 was transformed into excessive self-blame and an unjustified loss of self-confidence after October of 1973. And so people on the outside began to see Israel as a loser, or at very best, as a standoff in a situation that would never end and that Israel could never win. Rationalizations began building up in anticipation of eventual

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defeat, progressive theologians in their way of thinking and traditional theologians in their way of thinking. What is common to both ways of thinking — as I see it — is a loss of faith. It plays into the hands of Israel's enemies if only because it raises their hopes and leads responsible Jewish leaders to *dibat ra'ah*. But what matters most is that this thinking is itself a delusion.

That these are "difficult times for non-believers," as Feldman phrased it, even secularists would agree. But that these are also "very difficult times for believers," as he also stressed, I would strongly dispute. On the contrary, for the true believer, these are magnificent times. Let me recall an event of just this July: when Jews in Bnai Brak staged a mass public prayer assembly on Thursday, July 1, and Jews in synagogues everywhere raised their voices in *tefilah* on July 3, and it is answered on Sunday morning, July 4, 1976 in a way that the world regarded as "impossible" and "unbelievable." At that time God was never more evident.

The truth is that there is much to criticize about Israel, even more than the matters about which religious Jews in the Diaspora are sensitive. There are injustices. There are inefficiencies. There is excessive bureaucracy. There is a selfishness on the part of many sectors, "The public be damned, as long as I get what's coming to me" attitude, indicating a degeneration of early idealism. The upper middle class American standard of living has become a measure by which the good life is judged. One cannot even get to know the full bill of particulars until one has lived here for a while and actively interacted with different facets of Israeli life. Religious elements are not blameless in all these matters either.

Criticism is legitimate! But what is not legitimate is to lose faith and plant doubts about our ability to correct what is wrong, to improve what is flawed, to overcome what is threatening.

This was in fact the sin of the ten out of the twelve scouts Moses sent forth. Majority and minority reports did not differ about the facts. But it became a difficult time for ten great believers, princes of the people. They said:

We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than

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we . . . And they spread an evil report of the land . . . (it) is a land that eateth up the inhabitants thereof . . . (Numbers 13:31, 32).

While the other two said:

We should go up at once and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it (Numbers 13:30).

One report planted doubt; the other planted hope.

The “strong pockets of Jewish idealism” are also familiar with the flaws and the faults that exist here. Yet in their hearts there is not one iota of doubt about the continuing fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel. They do not see the present imperfect society as a reason for being denied Divine protection and ultimate redemption. They see it as a challenge. It provides them with a mission — but is not a source of despair.

They too read the Torah and daily recite the *Shema*. But they also read:

Know therefore that it is not for your righteousness that the Lord your God gives you this good land to possess it, for you are a stiff-necked people (Deuteronomy 9:6).

They feel confident in the assurance that there will be no third destruction—that this third redemption shall be everlasting.

Permanent settlement in their land will come only with the third redemption. The first redemption was the redemption from Egypt; the second redemption was that of Ezra; and the third shall never end (Midrash Tanhuma, Parshat Shoftim 9).

And if religious Jews feel moved — in the spirit of “you shall surely reprove” — to direct admonition to the secular elements of Israeli society, such admonition is no less in order towards some of those who are seemingly uncompromising in their devotion to Torah learning and Torah keeping. I say “seemingly uncompromising” because the dimension of *bain adam l’havero* and the dimension of *Eretz Yisrael* are also part of the same Torah. All is not perfect in the religious establishment or in the

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religious anti-establishment. No one is beyond a call to *teshuvah* and to *heshbon hanefesh*. If we are to join Feldman in trembling when reciting the *Shema Yisrael*, in becoming fully aware of the meaning of *hishamru lachem* . . . it should also be for wrong doings for which even many a daily worshipper and Sabbath observer might be held accountable and not only for the sins committed by the "Jerusalem neighbor (who) goes off to a discotheque on Friday night."

But I do not tremble! Despite its many religious flaws and secularist leadership, Israel *really* is a Jewish state. It is true that the State is not run in accordance with Halakhah. The country is certainly not in the image of Meah Shearim, nor even of Bnai Brak. It is not a theocracy governed by rabbinic rulings, nor by religious councils. Many varied elements share in the decision-making process and in exercising political control. Many things happen that cause pain to a sensitive religious person. Nevertheless, the country reflects Torah and tradition to a far greater degree than any other community in the world that is composed of a similar cross-section of Jews as is to be found here. It is a country where sacrificial idealism is still to be found, where courage abounds. That is the other side to the coin that we should see.

So let me turn to a few items that gladden the heart of a Jew living here. These should be very obvious, yet perhaps we need to be reminded. I don't even want to elaborate upon the many great centers of Torah learning and fine religious institutions that abound here, nor the great many individuals who reflect true righteousness and saintliness, but about the simple day-to-day things that set the Jewish spirit of the entire land or at least most of it.

It is in this secular country that is seen by some as "serving other gods and worshipping them," where the state radio begins its daily broadcasting at 6 a.m. with the reading of the *Shema*, followed by *Mah Tov*, the Psalm of the Day, and a brief lesson from the Mishnah *Yomit*. The 6 a.m. news doesn't therefore come on till about 6:10 a.m. (On *Tisha b'Av* morning, "*Al naharot Bavel*" is substituted for the Psalm of the Day and the daily Mishnah lesson, which are omitted.)

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It is in this secular land that *kashrut*, which the Torah relates to the theme of becoming “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” is kept in all public and government institutions. To this secular land, there is no importing of non-kosher meat. Lard shortening in baked goods is not anything we worry about.

Shabbat is the national day of rest. Businesses are shut down and public transport is not generally available. It is in this secular country that I feel the peaceful tranquility of the Shabbat as I walk to *shul* for *Kabbalat Shabbat* or on Shabbat morning. The occasional automobile that passes me by is in sharp contrast to the rush-hour traffic that invariably passed me by on my way to *shul* on Friday evening and Saturday morning for so many years in blessed America. There are those who see the passing vehicle in Jerusalem and seethe. I remember the rush-hour traffic in *galut* and feel inspired.

The very first news broadcast that comes on after nightfall on *motzai Shabbat* provides a summary of the day's news “for those who do not listen to the radio on Shabbat.” The announcer wishes me a *shavuah tov*, as on other occasions he wishes me a *hag sameach* or a *moadim l'simha*. I don't remember Walter Cronkite or Howard K. Smith ever taking note of the days that mean so much to me as a Jew.

It is this secular country where one can be drafted into the army and still be able to abide by all the religious duties, if one so wishes. This is not by sufferance or tolerance but by right, the result of standing military orders.

There are many poor shows on Israeli television but there is also some very fine religious programming that instructs and inspires.

Comes *Pesach*, and bread is NOT seen throughout the land. They tell me there are places (apart from Arab sections) where it is possible to find it. I have travelled this country north and south, east and west during *hol hamoed Pesach*, and I have not yet run across it. All *hametz* is literally removed. Even in supermarkets in this secular country — at least what I have seen in Jerusalem — entire aisles are covered with paper under which their *hametz* stock is stored away; it is not sold during the week to anyone.

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This is the only country in the world where the secular municipalities time their annual tree trimming schedules to the week before *Sukkot* so as to provide an abundance of free *sekhakh* to Jews.

Comes *Tisha b'Av*, and in this secular country, restaurants and movie houses are closed on *Tisha b'Av* night. Television and radio is devoted entirely to programs about the *hurban*, to themes entirely in keeping with the spirit of the day. Not everyone fasts, but no Jew is ignorant of the day.

Here in Israel, the prices of fish and meat and other items needed for the proper celebration of a *hag* are *reduced* before the holiday by secular government authorities, and not as in some Diaspora communities where the *hag* becomes an opportunity for profiteering.

It is in this secular environment where the *pirsumei d'nisah* of *Hanukah* can and is really achieved. It is *befarhes'ya* and not confined to home and synagogue. One may not be *yotzai y'dai hovato*, but a non-religious person can listen to the entire *Megillah* reading on *Purim* night as it is broadcast on TV live from some synagogue. "When Adar enters, one increases one's joy" can be felt in the streets during the week before *Purim*.

It is the secular government that prints postage stamps that reflect the heritage of this country. A goodly number proclaim themes and passages from the very heart of Jewish tradition . . . from Bible and Talmud.

*Hol hamoed* is really part of a seven or eight day *hag*, not a break between the first and last days of *Yom Tov*. Throughout *Pesach* and *Sukkot*, laundries are closed for the entire week. This secular country reflects the *din* in this traditional business practice. In the *galut*, the emphasis is on the *hol*; in Israel, it is on the *moed*.

And of course, *Yom Kippur* is like nowhere else in the world. The entire country shuts down — including radio and television. Even the non-religious do not publicly desecrate the day.

All marriages in this country — even for the secularist Jew — must be *k'halakhah*. So are all divorces. So are all conversions. Not all are happy about this and many are trying to change it — but this is the situation. All male children are properly circum-

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cised. All burials are performed by *hevrot kadisha*. Even state funerals conducted by this secular government are in full keeping with the *din* and *minhag*, from the two soldiers standing guard saying *tehillim* to the final declaration requesting *mehilah* from the deceased.

When one criticizes the non-Jewishness of the State, one ought to bear in mind all of the above, and compare it to the record of even the best Jewish communities in the Diaspora. When we in this country talk about an intermarriage, we mean between a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi, not between a Jew and a gentile.

Maybe there was a fight 28 years ago about how God was to be alluded to in the drafting of Israeli's declaration of independence and *Tzur Yisrael* was the compromise. But when on July 4, 1976, the special session of the *Knesset* was called to order to hear the Prime Minister's report about Entebbe, the Speaker of the *Knesset* before turning the floor over to the Prime Minister, took out a *kippah*, placed it on his head and recited a chapter of Psalms.

If Rabin doesn't mention God, the leader of the Opposition (not to speak of the religious parties) follows him immediately with *barukh hashem* and *b'ezrat hashem* and *todah lashem* from the same platform.

One should also never forget that even the most secularist Jew in Israel fulfills at least one very important *mitzvah*—that of *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* which, say the Sages, is *shekulah k'neged kol hamitzvot she-ba-Torah*, equivalent to all the *mitzvot* in the Torah (Sifri, Parshat Re'eh). Only to five other commandments does our tradition ascribe equal significance!

It is therefore presumptuous of anyone to minimize or ignore the merit that might be accrued in the sight of God by those who do dwell in the land, especially in view of such declarations by the Sages:

Said R. Eleazar: All who dwell in the Land of Israel live without sin . . . (*Ketubot* 111a).

And Maimonides declares:

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Said the Sages: All who dwell in the Land of Israel, his sins are forgiven him (Rambam, *Hil. Melakhim* 5:11).

The Talmud is quite emphatic:

Our Rabbis taught: One should always live in the Land of Israel even in a town most of whose inhabitants are idolators, and not live outside of the Land even in a town most of whose inhabitants are Israelites, for whoever lives in the Land of Israel may be considered to have a God . . . (*Ketubot* 110b)

I am deliberately not completing this quote inasmuch as my purpose is only to emphasize what our Sages felt about living in Israel, even under the worst circumstances.

Feldman writes at one point:

This is what worries me: in the times of the Judges, Israel was at least aware that there was a God above them. They turned to strange idols, but never really lost sight of their own God . . . but today we have transcended our idol worshipping ancestors . . . we are not even aware that we have One of our very own.

The implication of course is that the contemporary situation is worse. I'm not so sure. I think that if a little more thought were given to the question, there would be unanimity of opinion that one who was never taught about God in the first place, the *tinok shenishbah*, is treated far more kindly and with greater understanding than the believer who turns away from God.

If Feldman is discouraged by the Book of Judges, Chapter 10, I am encouraged by the Book of Kings II, Chapter 14. There we read that Jeroboam, son of Joash king of Israel who did evil in the sight of God, was yet privileged by God to restore the borders of Israel to a point that neither Joshua nor David succeeded. The reason for Jeroboam's special merit is that he dealt respectfully with the prophets and refused to accept *lashon hara* about the prophet Amos.

In that moment, said the Holy One Blessed Be He, even though this generation are idol worshippers, and the head of this generation is an idol worshipper, nevertheless, the land that I said would be for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, I will put into his hand . . . (*Sefer Eliyahu Zuta*, Chapter 7).

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Still one is wrong to compare our times with those days when *avodah zarah* was so rampant. We fail to realize how much *yahadut* is absorbed in this country even by someone who can't recite the blessings on the Torah and doesn't know what to do in a synagogue. While there may be many "strange idols" and much profaneness, there is also an abundance of *kedushah* in the land and people. Even among so-called *hilonim*, there is today a searching and a yearning for more Jewishness and more authentic Jewish life. Synagogues have begun to appear on leftist *kibbutzim* — because younger people too have begun to demand it. The publishing house of the anti-religious Shomer Hatzair has set this year aside to concentrate on books on *limudai yahadut*. People — young and old — are grappling with the meaning of one's Jewish self, and are returning to authentic Jewish sources.

The point I am making is that we have got to recognize the *spiritual direction* in which this country is headed — and I see that as positive. If religious elements only knew how to exploit the situation, and build the kind of bridges that a group like Geshar is doing so well, wonders could be achieved. Little will be gained by pointing the finger and fixing blame. All that will do is put the other side on the defensive, prepared to strike back, instead of winning them over.

And what a sovereign state can do to save Jews — as was done in Entebbe — no Jewish organization can do. Even a secular state performs a great act, not just of saving lives, *hatzalat nefashot*, but of Sanctification of the Divine Name, *kiddush hashem*. When the nations of the world marvel at and praise what *Medinat Yisrael* does, it is the God of Israel who is honored, even if leaders of the state do not give Him the credit. The nations of the world, unlike some of our own people, do not distinguish between the Jewish people, its Torah, and its God. The glory of one is the glory of all.

We say it twice weekly in *tahanun*:

Our Father, Merciful Father, show us a good sign and gather our dispersed from the four corners of the earth; let all the nations realize and know that Thou art the Lord our God.

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Yet the connection between the ingathering of Jews to Israel and *kiddush hashem* apparently fails to register among the many who say it. "Wherefore should the nations say: 'Where is your God'; help us for Your sake" is the way we express the truth that dishonor to *Am Yisrael* is dishonor to *Elohai Yisrael*. When Jews were being slaughtered, it is the God of Israel who was discredited.

If there had been a State of Israel in 1940, it is highly questionable that Hitler would have succeeded as much as he did in carrying out his nefarious plans. The railways and crematoria that Roosevelt and Churchill would not bomb would surely have been blown up. Uprisings in the camps would have been organized somehow long before the inhabitants of the Warsaw and other ghettos stood up to fight in 1943, years after Hitler's machine began to take its terrible toll of Jewish lives.

While it is true that Jews and Judaism survived for centuries without a *medinah* because of its adherence to Torah, the truth is that the *dream* of *Eretz Yisrael* was there alongside, in every *tefilah*, in every *hag*, in every ceremony, every day and every night. It is illusory to think that contemporary Diaspora Jewry could return only to the dream and survive a disassociation from the reality of the State of Israel after all that transpired since 1948. For that would be a shattering not only of the *reality* of Israel, but also of the *dream* that meant so much for so many centuries.

This is not an appeal for *aliyah* — at least not for rabbis. While I acted differently, I do believe that practising rabbis and educators doing good work in the Diaspora ought to remain there. Jewish communities desperately need their leadership and guidance. If all rabbis and teachers were to yield to their innermost yearnings to live in Israel, the Jewish Agency would only be forced to send out additional thousands of rabbis and teachers to serve the communities in the Diaspora. And such *shlichim* couldn't be but a fraction as effective as are the men trained in and now serving in the Diaspora. So why create an exchange? The status quo is certainly preferable.

But if Israel's crisis can be resolved, as Feldman says, "by Jews becoming Jewish Jews" in Israel, let me add that that goal

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could be helped along significantly if a half-million Torah-observant Jews in the Diaspora who feel strongly about strengthening the Jewishness of the State were to add to that Jewishness by their own permanent presence.