At the Gates — בנסעורים

Israel Again . . . and Again

By my count, since I began serving as the Editor of the Reform Jewish Quarterly (Winter 2014), there have been over a dozen articles on Israel and Zionism. Many more, including Book Reviews, have touched on the Land and its people although not as a primary focus. As sure as we encounter in these pages analyses of sources, moments in Jewish history, and insights into the rabbinic profession, we return over and again to the stretch of terrain from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, from Mt. Hermon to the Gulf of Eilat.

This issue marks an important moment for Israel, the seventieth anniversary of its formation as the reconstituted State of the Jewish people. Birthdays that end in “zero” tend to have the ability to raise attention. Another decade in the books; time once more to assess what has unfolded and to consider what yet will be. The age of 70 carries perhaps a bit extra significance as it is cited in Psalm 90 as the “span of our life.” I do not, however, wish to suggest that it is more important than Israel at 40, 50, 100, or 120. It is a convenient marker for us to pause and take stock.

As a good proportion of the readers of this Journal are American rabbis, I call your attention to the significant parallels between the United States and Israel. The creation of both countries was so unusual that their founders thought it necessary to issue a proclamation that sought to justify their nation’s existence. Both had to wage war in order to assure that independence, and upon the successful prosecution of the conflict, took control of land that had contested borders. While the United States has had the benefit of an ocean separating it from its principal adversaries, it nonetheless had to engage in a number of violent conflicts in order to establish its territorial integrity; including in 1846, the seventieth year after declaring independence, when it fought Spanish-controlled Mexico over its southwestern boundary. Israel, needless to say, has never enjoyed fixed and internationally recognized borders, and has had to fight military as well as
international and domestic political battles over the territory it wishes to control.

The Declarations of Independence of the two nations not only include justifications for their existence, but also aspirational statements regarding what sort of nation they plan to be. The American proclamation includes the stirring assertion that “all men are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” Even as those words were penned, they were subjected to arguments over what is meant by “men.” Leaving gender aside, African slaves and indigenous peoples had been bracketed out of the category. In 1846, both the forced migration of the aborigines and a territorial expansion that included the spread of slave-holding were inflaming passions that divided the people. The political leadership was mostly paralyzed by the divisions and sought to paper over the differences with compromises. Within fifteen years, the intolerable situation exploded in bloody conflict. At the end of the Civil War, slavery was over, but the tensions of race that persist to this day belie any pretense that the aspiration expressed over 240 years ago has been realized.

I need not describe to this readership the similarity of Israel’s divisions now at the age of 70—in light of the sentiment found in its founding document: “The State of Israel . . . will be based on the precepts of liberty, justice and peace taught by the Hebrew Prophets; will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex.”

In my opinion, the challenge inherent in this assertion is two-fold. First, leaving aside all territorial disputes, there is the persistent question of what it means to have full social and political equality in the Jewish State for citizens who are not and most likely will never be Jews? The second, perhaps an even deeper and more challenging concern, is what should we mean by the term “Jew.” The question is not “Who is a Jew?” it is “What is a Jew?”!

David ben Gurion, a story goes, when asked his definition of a Jew at the time of the ratification of Israel’s basic Law of Return, replied “A Jew is a Jew! That’s it!” This answer that essentially empties being Jewish of all content, is an attitude that goes back to the days of Herzl and many of Zionism’s founders. Paradoxically, this apparently all-encompassing definition leads to reductionism that constrains and hardens one sense of who is a Jew and who is not. Jewishness is fundamentally genetic; you simply
inherit it from a parent. Or it is a religiously defined category that is determined by an increasingly strict authority. Both assertions are deeply problematic—one on their own and in relation to one another—and yet it is these two that dominate much of the conversation regarding the Jewishness of the Jewish State.

The State of Israel at 70, every bit as much as the United States at 70—or at 242—is a work in progress, still attempting to discern and to implement the ideals it itself established at the beginning. This edition of the Journal is wholly devoted to the Jewish State. It is a broadly construed assessment representing the ideas, insights, and creativity of Israelis and non-Israelis, younger and older colleagues, rabbis, artists, and scholars. Three contributions, by Jeff Salkin, Michael Marmur, and Michael Meyer, help put this Spring 2018 issue into a certain context, as they all contributed essays to the RJQ on the occasion of its sixtieth anniversary; what has changed and what abides. We are all grateful to Neal Gold and Josh Weinberg for organizing and editing this special volume.

Our esteemed colleague Dow Marmur once noted that Reform Judaism and Zionism were the two movements arising out of the momentous social and intellectual challenges of the nineteenth century that faced the future with hope and optimism. The late Rabbi Dr. Emil Fackenheim articulated in his seminal 614th Commandment, the Voice of Auschwitz (“Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories”): “[Jews] are forbidden to despair of [humankind] and their world, and to escape into either other-worldliness or cynicism.” I personally leave you these thoughts. Israel—its vicious politics, riven society, and the constant and exhausting challenges it raises within itself, its immediate neighborhood, and on the world stage—is lamrot hakol (in spite of everything), the product of extraordinary energy and optimism. We must, in accord with our vision as Reform Jews, not despair. Seventy is not the “span of a life,” but just the beginning.

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