

DREAMS AND REALITY

Shavuot 2nd Day

May 27 2023

Rabbi Vernon Kurtz

A few weeks ago Bryna and I were participants on an AACI – the Association of Americans and Canadians in Israel – study trip in central Israel. Our last stop was at Moshav Nir Galim, a religious moshav near the city of Ashdod. Its founders were Holocaust survivors from Hungary and Central Europe who were fortunate enough to survive the Shoah and make their homes in Israel. On the moshav is Beit HaEdut – the Testimony House Museum. This museum was established in the early 1990's and its purpose is to amplify and deepen educational activity related to the Holocaust.

I had never been there before and therefore did not know what to expect. I found it moving, sad and optimistic all at the very same time. Mostly telling the story of the murder of Hungarian Jewry in 1944, it uses personal stories to highlight the tragedy of the Holocaust, including material on those who were murdered, as well as the survivors and those who saved Jews.

As we were walking around the museum I wandered into a small room where I saw on the walls of the room poetry written by those who were killed in the Shoah as well as by some survivors. Written only in Hebrew, without the normal accompanying English translation, I was greatly moved almost to tears reading their words. One poem, in particular, caught my attention. It was entitled Palestina. According to the explanation it was written and put to music by an unknown Greek Jew who did not survive Auschwitz-Birkenau. I do not know how the words survived the horrible deathly onslaught against our people.

The opening paragraph reads in Hebrew:

פּלֶשְׁתִּינָה

יִשְׂרָאֵל חִלּוֹם שֶׁל שָׁנוֹת הָאֲלֵפִיִּים

אֶרֶץ הַצֵּבִי וִירוּשָׁלַיִם

שֵׁם נַחְרוֹשׁ, נִזְרַע בְּדַמְעָה

שֵׁם נִקְצוֹר, נִקְצוֹרָה בְּרִינָה

I will attempt my own translation, though I know it will be inadequate:

Israel is the dream of 2000 years, the beautiful land and Jerusalem. There we will plow, we will plant in tears. There we will reap, we will reap in joy.

Those of you who are sensitive to the Hebrew language should immediately recognize the background the author used for the poem. It is Psalm 126, the Shir HaMaalot we sing before reciting Birkat HaMazon on Shabbat and Festivals.

נשיר המעלות בשׁוֹב יְהוָה אֶת־שִׁבְתָּ צִיּוֹן הָיִינוּ כְּחִלְמִים:

When the Lord restored our exiles to Zion, it was like a dream.

הַזֹּרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרִגְהָ יִקְצְרוּ:

They who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.

The poem written by an individual surrounded by death and destruction, looked beyond the moment as he or she dreamed of the restoration of the Jewish people in Zion. Unfortunately, this person was not fortunate enough to see that day come true. They could never have imagined that 3 years after the end of the war, that dream was realized. For the first time in 2000 years a State of Israel was declared.

Some of you may have noticed a recent Jewish Chicago magazine published by JUF. Bryna and I were asked to write a short piece concerning our relationship to the State of Israel. We began the piece with the words: “Our dream has been realized.” We went to describe our joy in making Aliyah and living in the Jewish State. It was a play on the words written on a hat I often wear. It was given to us by Nefesh B’Nefesh, an organization which helped us, as it does thousands of other North Americans, make Aliyah and find a new life in Israel. The hat has written on it these words: “Aliyah: Live the Dream.” As one author wrote: “Your real dreams happen when you’re wide awake and living them.” The author of the poem unfortunately did not live to see his or her dreams come true. Thankfully, we can attest to the fact that some dreams do come to fruition.

There have been many dreamers in Jewish history. One of them witnessed the return of the Jewish people to Zion after the destruction of the first Temple and the Babylonian exile. He authored the words of Psalm 126. Another dreamer was Theodore Herzl, the founder of modern day political Zionism. After the first Zionist Congress in Basel, which he organized, he wrote in his diary these famous words: “In Basle I established the Jewish State. If I were to say it publicly today, the response would be laughter from all directions. Perhaps in another five years, fifty years at most, everyone will recognize it.” Herzl could not have envisioned the tragedies that would befall the Jewish people only a few decades later nor the fight for the establishment of the state. However, almost exactly fifty years after he wrote those words David ben Gurion decreed the establishment of an independent Jewish state, to be called the State of Israel.

If Herzl would turn up today in the modern state that he felt he was establishing what would he see and what would he think about it? In the recent edition of the Sapir Journal highlighting Israel’s 75th anniversary, Darius Jones, the founder and president of the National Black Empowerment Council wrote: “In the face of all the obstacles of the natural world and the opposition of bitter enemies, the Jewish people established their long-prophesied homeland... Herzl himself would be awed by the miracle of modern-day Israel.”

There is that word again, “miracle”, that we discussed at the Tikkun on Shavuot eve. Is the establishment of the State of Israel a modern day miracle? It was David ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of the State of Israel, who was reported to have said: “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.”

In a recent interview in the Jerusalem Post, Ari Shavit, an author and veteran journalist was quoted as saying these words: “The basic historical analysis is that Israel is a miracle. What Israel did in its early years after independence, is almost ‘incomprehensible’. Its ability to win

three wars, to survive, to build 12 hospitals, 5 universities, a nuclear reactor in Dimona and put us at the forefront of science is an incredible achievement. It also did something no other country has done: absorb more people than the number that lived in the country at that time.”

While Shavit has some criticisms about modern day Israel, there is no doubt in his mind, that the creation of the state and its ability to survive and even thrive under the most difficult of circumstances, is miraculous, a dream come true.

The same sentiment was recently reiterated by Isabel Kershner, the New York Times correspondent in Israel and the author a new book “The Land of Hope and Fear: Israel’s Battle for its Inner Soul.” “The dream has been realized. It’s a prosperous mighty country,” she states. “Yes, it has its social and political problems. But at a macro level, it’s miraculous, as many people would say. Now the divisions are over the future character of the place. What kind of country will this be? If it survives, how will it survive? There is really no common vision for that anymore.”

Our good friend, Rabbi David Golinkin, of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, who has spoken at Beth El many times, agrees with Shavit and Kershner. In an essay he wrote entitled “Israel at 75: A fifty-year retrospective,” he looks back on his 50 years in Israel since making Aliyah in 1972. He too believes Israel is a miracle and it defies all logic. “A people that had just lost one-third of its members declares a state after an exile lasting 1,878 years” and it survived. Is that not miraculous?

Golinkin goes on to list 8 areas where Israel has succeeded against all odds: The ingathering of the exiles; the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language; the Israel Defense Forces which has become one of the best armies in the world; a place of Jewish time and space – in Israel Shabbat and the Festivals are national holidays and we live our lives by Jewish time; reforestation; Israel’s ability to produce its own water sources; being recognized as the start-up nation; and the measure of happiness – the fact that in 2023 Israel was ranked number four in the World Happiness Index.

If Golinkin stopped there one would think we were living in nirvana, in Gan Eden itself. However, reality is not always the same as the dream. Sometimes real world issues get in the way. He lists seven areas where we have not succeeded and still have work to do: Peace with the Palestinians; the Haredi dilemma; the change in Religious Zionism to become a very conservative political force; Jewish education – most students who attend secular schools have an extremely superficial knowledge of Judaism; religious pluralism; judicial reform; and Jewish unity.

Yes, the last two issues have been pushed to the forefront in the last few months due to the initiation of the current government’s interest in reforming or some would save revolutionizing Israel’s judicial system, especially the Supreme Court. As you know, it has led to the tearing apart of Israeli society at the seams with massive demonstrations and angry words spoken in public on the issue. Thankfully, the protests have not led to violence and looting as they have done in other countries, but they have led to great fissures in Israeli society. It was reported that some families did not gather together for the Pesach Seder this year, as political issues could be raised in the context of the ancient Passover story which might lead to shouting and cursing among the guests.

No one is quite sure where we will end up on the issue, but I fear that it will not be easy to bring our society back to where it was before the proposals were advanced. Unfortunately, the only thing that seems to bring us together as one nation are rockets being shot at us, or terrorist actions which kill and maim our citizens. The dream of Jewish unity is still that, a dream.

My colleague Rabbi Danny Gordis has recently authored a new book entitled “Impossible Takes Longer: 75 Years after its Creation, Has Israel Fulfilled its Founders’ Dreams.” He too believes that the creation and survival of Israel is a miracle and among other things has created a new reality for the Jewish world of today. Among many achievements he lists these: Jews are no longer defenseless; there has been a rebirth of Jewish and Hebrew Culture; Jews have been restored to the stage of history; and there are no more homeless Jews. “Israel,” Gordis writes, “was meant, first and foremost, to reset the existential condition of the Jewish people. Has it done it? It has. Perfectly? Far, far from it.”

Gordis continues: “What inspires me about Israel is that what has emerged in the Jewish state is unlike anything that anyone planned. It rebelled against Judaism and emerged deeply Jewish. It has abandoned many of the early commitments of Zionism’s founding thinkers but remains clearly a country fashioned in the image of their visions. It is nothing like the centralized, cohesive, socialist, struggling Israel of old, yet in its universal health care, universal draft, highly volunteering society, many of those values still permeate the modern, capitalist, consumer-driven, tech-center Israel of today. It has a strong national ethos of cohesiveness, along with a public square rich with debate, edgy civil discourse, and manifold political disagreements.”

He, too, believes we have a long way to go to fulfill the visions and dreams of the founders. Among the issues he mentions we must work on are that religion in Israel needs to be richer, deeper, more tolerant, more expansive; we must continually be searching for ways to complete a process of peace in our region; there must be a sense of obligation to and responsibility for the Jewish people no matter where Jews might find themselves; and Israel which was founded to offer Jews shelter from the rest of the world, now needs to reach out to that world and inspire it – even as the world remains hostile to the idea of a Jewish state.

In short, according to Gordis and Golinkin we still have our work cut out for us. The 75th anniversary of the establishment of the state is a good opportunity to see how far we have come and yet how far we have yet to go in order to achieve the goal of a state which lives up to the ideal of a model society, which is a light to the Jewish people who live in it, a safe and equitable place to live for the minorities who abide among us, a beacon to Jewish communities around the world, and an exemplar to the nations on the face of this globe.

We should keep in mind the words of a recent editorial written by Bret Stephens in which he states that the Jewish state recently turned 75, mostly in a sour mood. He asserts that even with issues of coalition politics, proposed judicial reform, Israel experiencing 5 days of rocket fire and the fact that Netanyahu can’t get an invitation to the White House, Israel is doing remarkably well. “Israel is not a country that defines itself in terms of what it’s against, what it’s not, or who has done what to it. There is also an affirmative vision of Israeli identity, centered on the ideal of a renovated and renewed Jewish civilization within which its citizens can find prosperity, a sense of purpose and relative security,” writes Stephens. He concludes, “If the success of a society can be measured by the speed at which the miraculous becomes the mundane, Israel is doing fine.”

Even if dreams do come true, reality presents itself with new challenges. On my visit to Nir Galim and the House of Testimony I was very moved by the dreams of that individual Jew who authored that magnificent poem in the death camp wishing and hoping for brighter days for the Jewish people in its own homeland. We owe it to that Greek Jew not only to make sure that the State of Israel survives, but that it thrives and is indeed a “light unto the nations.”

Perhaps the dreams and the present reality were best summed up by Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City, when he wrote in that very same Sapir Journal: “Before Israel was a country, it was a dream... The creation of Israel was proof that with enough determination and faith in our convictions, we could create the world we want for our children, centered on the values that we cherish here at home: freedom, democracy, and equality... Tomorrow can be better than today, and we have a special obligation to make it so. That includes sharing the dream of Israel with new generations... I remain optimistic about its future. After all, if the dream of Israel can be realized, what obstacle can’t be overcome?”

With our hard work, your continuous strong support, and God’s help I believe that all our dreams will be realized. May that day come speedily in our time.