

Israel: Still Reaching for the Stars
February 8, 2003

When I first arrived in Miami, people used to tell me, "If you don't like the weather, wait a few minutes – it will change."

In certain respects, I felt that way about the mood of the country this past week in Israel.

When I arrived in Jerusalem last Wednesday, there was an anticipatory feeling of emotions, driven primarily by the consensus expressed in elections held the previous day. The country had clearly repudiated the failed and mistaken policies of the Oslo Peace Accords by giving Ariel Sharon and his Likud Party an overwhelming 38 seats in the Knesset, 20 more than what they had in the previous government. The once-dominant Labor party was reduced to 19 seats.

In a post-election analysis lecture I heard, the speaker explained that the Likud has moved to the left and now occupies the center, and that the Labor Party had also moved further to the left. The individual, a political scientist, explained the meaning of the results - "Israelis are short-term hawks and long-term doves." The truth of that comment was borne out by most of my conversations with Israelis. No one wants the conflict to continue indefinitely. Yet most people agree that the only way to respond to Palestinian terror is by a strong deterrence. The reality is that the relative calm of the last few weeks is deceptive. Israeli forces discovered and successfully aborted several major attacks planned by Hamas and Islamic Jihad for Election Day. The only reason that things are relatively quiet at present is because Israeli forces have reoccupied most Palestinian areas, resulting in an inability for terrorists to leave their villages to infiltrate Israel. The presence of Israel forces has also yielded much valuable information and intelligence about the plans and operations of the terrorists. This has resulted in the foiling of a number of planned attacks.

My son, Ezra, told me of a particularly daring operation reported on Israeli television a few months ago. Elite Israeli special forces, dressed as members of an Arab terrorist group walked straight into the headquarters of a wanted terrorist. They interrupted him as he was in a meeting with his advisers and told him to come with them. They took him away in their vehicle, without him or any of his bodyguards realizing that Israeli forces had just pulled off a clandestine operation, taking away their commander, a wanted terrorist responsible for the deaths of a number of Israelis.

The most telling comment I heard from a speaker, which helps to clarify the situation in the Middle East and succinctly and simply describes the problem was the following: "The problem for the Arabs is not so much that the Palestinians do not have a state, but that the Israelis do." That really sums up the core and essence of the conflict, and what motivates and causes the Palestinians to act as they do.

With my colleagues from the UJC Rabbinic Cabinet, we took a helicopter ride to survey the area. I had never before been in a helicopter. I now understand why it is a favorite tool of Israeli strategists as a means of familiarizing American politicians with the dimensions of the area. Even more surprising to me than the proximity of the Palestinian Arab towns to Israeli population centers was to see how close the Palestinian towns are to Israel Arab towns and villages.

The mood of the country was radically altered with the sad and tragic news about the explosion of the Columbia space shuttle. It was as if the entire nation was in mourning. Israel is such a small country, that in a time such as this, everyone feels truly connected.

The tragedy was especially difficult since it was the one ray of hope and good news that people were so desperately looking for. With the economy devastated by the war on terrorism and the drop in tourism, this was the one thing which people had rallied around and uplifted them. The nation was looking forward to celebrating this small step for Israel, this giant leap for all.

Ilan Ramon represented so many wonderful qualities and instilled so much pride, uniting Israelis and Jews around the world. Although he was not personally observant, he understood his role as a representative and emissary of the Jewish people. As a result, he ate Kosher food on his mission, carried with him a mezuzah and a torah scroll smuggled into and out of a concentration camp, as well as a replica of a drawing of the moon made by a child in Theresienstadt. And when he was above the land of Israel, he said, "The world looks marvelous from up here, so peaceful, so wonderful, and so fragile." And looking down on his beloved homeland, he recited the prayer which is the most well-known declaration of faith of the Jewish people, "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad."

From his space capsule, he called upon every Jew in the world to plant a tree in the Land of Israel in the coming year.

The loss of such a once-in-a-lifetime hero, who was such a unifying figure, who meant so much to a wary nation is hard to describe. People were numbed, in a state of shock and disbelief. As a cab driver told me the day after the terrible accident, "The malls and night clubs were all empty last night. No one wanted to go out."

The third concern that was clearly palpable and apparent was talk about the upcoming war with Iraq. When I was in Israel last month, the morning news show had a segment with a little girl nonchalantly showing how to properly put on a gas mask. Her smile and ease, which clearly was meant to calm and reassure the public, seemed surreal.

But this is reality in Israel.

There is a widespread hope that the war will be conclusive and decisive and will result in a powerful message to other belligerent tyrants in the Arab world which will lead to a restructuring of the current stalemate and quagmire.

All of this – and my visit barely touched on politics. The main focus of my visit was the annual study program with 19 colleagues at the Hartman Institute where our topic was the concept of Kedusha – sanctity and holiness in Jewish sources. I will share some of what I learned when I teach at next Saturday's Shabbat lunch. And I will speak next Saturday morning about the first part of my trip, where I was part of a delegation of rabbis who traveled to Paris, France to meet with French Jews and members of the French government about the situation of Jews in France.

Somehow, the reality of Israel is that despite all of the difficulties it faces, the country survives and the people persevere. For the first time in two years, I noticed that the pedestrian mall on ben Yehuda Street in Jerusalem was coming back to life.

I would like to conclude by referring to today's Torah portion.

The description of the building of the Tabernacle follows on the heels of the two previous week's parashot, which consist of the giving of the laws to the people of Israel. There is an amazing amount of detail about the construction of the Mishkan, not unlike the amount of detail necessary for something as complicated as a spacecraft. Just as a mission to space offers a chance to touch the heavens and to connect heaven and earth, the purpose of the mishkan here on earth is seen by the mystics as a means of replicating the Heavenly Tabernacle shel malah, of above.

Some of our commentators note that the purpose of creating the sanctuary, so that God may dwell "b'tocham", in their midst, means "with them", within each and every member of the people of Israel. It is necessary for each individual Jew to strive to build a mikdash in one's own life and to personalize the relationship between each person and all of Israel, and between each individual and God.

Ilan Ramon realized that was part of his journey, that he was sanctifying the name of God as a proud representative of the people and state of Israel.

In commenting on the Torah scroll he carried with him into space, he said, "It symbolizes more than anything the ability of the Jewish people to survive everything, including horrible periods, and go from the darkest days to days of hope and faith in the future."

Just as Jews in Israel find the internal will to persevere and survive, so may we.

"Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad."

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