

March 2005 Trip to Israel
March 26, 2005

In reflecting on my many trips to Israel, it is amazing how often something that occurs when I arrive has served as the framework for my trip and my report to you.

A year or two ago, the shelling in Sderot and the killing of an 11 year old girl, who fell on her five year old brother to protect him represented the nature of the onslaught Israel was facing, as well as the courage and sacrifice of ordinary individuals in the face of such attacks.

This time, the day before my arrival with several families from our shul, Israel's Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, had just opened its brand new exhibit. The extraordinary thing about this event is that leaders from 40 nations, including UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, were present for the ceremony. It was the largest gathering of world leaders in Israel since the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin. For some inexplicable reason, the United States was not represented by our President, Secretary of State, or some other high-ranking foreign policy official from the administration, but by the Mayor of New York, Michael Bloomberg.

Had any other nation sent a prominent mayor, the speculation about the meaning of such an act would have been a focus of speculation in the Israeli media. But as someone said to me, "With the United States, it does not matter. We are such good friends, and Bush is such a strong supporter, we are not worried." He reminded me of how Israelis had responded to the attack on 9-11 with such deep personal agony and empathy.

Since the new museum will not open to the public until next week, we could only peek into it from the outside. It is an architectural wonder. The story is told, not just through pictures and text, as in the old exhibit, but by using video and more advanced technology to convey the history and the extent of the horror.

In commenting on the new museum, the architect, Moshe Sadfie, explained its dramatic opening, onto the hills of Jerusalem and said, "it was important that the experience of going through the museum not end in concrete, but that it open up to a view of the hills of Jerusalem."

Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, echoed this sentiment with his speech at the ceremony when he commented, "When you leave this museum, you see the sky of Jerusalem. I know how a Jew feels when he emerges from these depths and breathes the air of Jerusalem. He feels at home. He feels protected. He feels the terrible difference between living in one's homeland, in a country which can provide protection, and standing alone, utterly defenseless.... He knows Israel is the only place in the world where Jews have the right to defend themselves, and that proves the Jewish people will never know another Holocaust." He was

reminding world leaders that the vibrant independent nation of Israel is a powerful response and antidote to the poison of anti-semitism.

Tensions between Israel and the Palestinians were noticeably reduced. Checkpoints were less intrusive and less noticeable than this past summer. We traveled from Beth Shean in the north to Jerusalem in the south, using Kvish 90, a road which passes through Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and goes past Jericho, a path which Symcha and I specifically and consciously avoided the last 4 ½ years. Taking this route shortened the trip by about an hour and a half, and could only be done due to the lessening of tensions. Jericho had just been turned over to the administration of the Palestinian Authority the day we arrived.

That the hotels, streets and restaurants were full, is another, more important by-product of the period of sheket, of quiet, and reflects a dramatic upsurge in the number of tourists returning to Israel, which is critical to Israel's economy.

When I asked my driver to the airport when business started to pick up, he told me – in November. "When Arafat died," I said. Then he corrected himself and said, "Actually in October." I said, "When Arafat got sick." His removal from the scene has had a dramatic impact on the Middle East.

But the optimism felt today is not the same kind of blind, naïve euphoria of the Oslo era. The Palestinian venomous hatred, the barbaric nature of so many of the attacks over the last 4 ½ years, and of the society which celebrates the so-called martyrdom of their youth, the unrelenting desire to kill Israelis, all of this has resulted in a much more realistic assessment of the intent of the Palestinians and of the prospects for peace.

No one is happy about withdrawing from the Gaza Strip, except maybe Yossi Beilin. Not even Prime Minister Sharon is happy to do this. A demonstration against the withdrawal drew over 100,000 people shortly before we arrived. A counter-demonstration, in support of the withdrawal last Saturday night, drew a mere 10,000 people. But it is seen as a necessary act which is being done because it is in Israel's best interest.

The major concern which is on the mind of everyone is that the residents of the Gaza Strip will need to be forcefully removed, causing Israel soldiers to have to act forcibly against their fellow citizens. People fear the divisiveness and the impact of violence, of civil disobedience, of rabbinic rulings urging people not to leave, of a civil war among brothers, and the potential for the assassination of the Prime Minister.

As I warned on the High Holidays when I mentioned that this would happen this year, the stakes are high. People have been living in the Gaza Strip for over 35 years. They have not only built homes, schools and neighborhoods, but cemeteries where they have buried their dead. The settlement of Gush Katif has

done something no one else has ever done before in that part of the world. They have developed a major agricultural industry, in the desert. In fact, over 10% of all of Israel's agricultural exports come from this small group of people. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz spoke to residents and rabbis in the Gaza Strip the other day, and the people broke down in tears when they spoke about leaving. It will be painful for all.

One of the concerns is that the withdrawal not be seen as a victory for terrorism, a claim already being made by Islamic Jihad. The danger in this is because it is widely felt that Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in the summer of 2000 is what encouraged the Palestinians in September of that year to launch the current war. They thought Israel had become soft and weak and had lost its will to fight, and that since Israel was on the run in the north, they could succeed in destroying the Israeli economy and will.

The other concern is that since the withdrawal is unilateral, Israel is not getting anything in return for evacuating these areas and the painful, heart-wrenching evicting of residents.

Israel is trying to effectuate the act in as positive a way as possible. We heard of one moshav in the Negev heavily burdened by debt and on the verge of bankruptcy, whose youngsters had all left. Thirty families from one of the neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip will resettle en masse, with their children in this moshav. The government worked with the banks to wipe out the debt. As a result, some of the children of the original inhabitants, young people in their 20's and 30's are now moving back as a result of the improved conditions and prospects for the future.

The prevailing thinking is that despite all the concerns, Israel will be in a much better position – strategically, militarily from a defense posture, diplomatically and financially – by consolidating and withdrawing.

The verdict is not yet in on the new Palestinian leader, Mahmud Abbas. He certainly is an improvement over his predecessor – this is probably the one thing all Israelis can agree on. He has not yet dismantled and disarmed the terrorist organization. Time will tell if his policy of patience will result in the ultimate demise of the structure and culture of terror, or if it will result in postponing an inevitable and necessary confrontation, or if they will use this time to rearm, regroup, and relaunch their attacks. Needless to say, the situation requires further and constant monitoring.

As I said on Yom Kippur, Israel has clearly won this latest war – a war which still does not yet have a name. Already, the United States has started to send teams to Israel to learn from their example.

It won because they figured out how to do what everyone said could not be done – to defeat terrorism.

It won because the people were determined not to let the terrorists win. With courage and resolve, they did not allow its spirit to be broken.

It won this war without sacrificing its morality or dignity. Amazingly, it won without annihilating or devastating the other side.

It won because Israel had a friend in the White House who understood what was at stake and how, unlike his predecessors, did not demand that Israel fight terror with a hand tied behind its back.

As I always try to remind you whenever I speak about Israel, we share the same fate, and their struggle is ours, as we are united and must stand with our fellow Jews at all times.

The end of my trip coincided with the festive holiday of Purim, which is actually still being celebrated until tomorrow in Jerusalem, since it is a walled city and the second day falling as it does on Shabbat, extends it for one more day.

Wherever we went, children were in festive costumes, as were many adults in many places of business. We heard the megillah read in the Great Synagogue of Jerusalem, and saw the joy on the faces of many. It is always such a unique and wonderful experience to be in Israel for a holiday, for it is shared by the entire country. Stores sell costumes, and everyone is swept up in the national celebrations.

In the Megillah, we read, "Layehudim, hayta orah v'simcha, v'sasson viy'kar, ken tieheyeh lanu: For the Jews, there was light, joy and happiness -- so may there be for us."

We can only hope and pray that this will be the case, and that the people of Israel will soon see the light at the end of the tunnel, and know the joy of peace, they so desperately seek.

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