

# Jerusalem, Israel and the Jewish Tomorrow

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RABBI PHILIP S. SCHEIM

Yaakov Hazan, born in Brisk, Lithuania in 1899, made *aliyah* to Mandatory Palestine in 1923, after having been one of the founders of *HaShomer HaTzair* in Poland. Upon arriving in pre-State Israel, he quickly joined with other members of his pioneering generation, engaging in the incredibly difficult work of draining swamps in the Beit Shean valley, and other equally challenging projects. He would become a foundational figure in the Kibbutz Movement, in the *Histadrut*, and a long-serving Knesset member. Not long before his death, Hazan shared the roots of his Zionism in a radio interview.

He told, how, as a ten-year old child, a doctor suggested that the best cure for his anemia would be exercise in the open summer air. His father apprenticed him to a gentile farmer, with whom he tilled the ground diligently from dawn to dusk. Despite the arduous work, he noticed that the farmer had a perennial smile on his lips, which young Yaakov asked him to explain. “Don’t you hear the land singing?” asked the farmer incredulously. Yaakov cupped his ear to the ground, but disappointedly reported that he heard nothing. “I know why,” responded the farmer. “It is not your land.” At that moment, young Yaakov Hazan vowed to move to his homeland, and to hear its song.<sup>1</sup>

Song has played a significant role in Israel, from the earliest of time, to our own day. The Torah, in the Joseph stories, describes the fruit and nuts of the land of Israel as *Zimrat ha-Aretz*, “the song of the Land.”<sup>2</sup> And most famously, Psalms (137:4) recalls our ancestors’ weeping by the rivers of Babylon, and their lament: “אֵיךְ נִשְׁיֵר אֶת־שִׁיר יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נְכָר” – How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil?”

I take you back, now, to an event fifty years ago, to the Israel Song Festival 5727, which took place on *Yom HaAtzmaut*, May 15, 1967, three weeks before the outbreak of what

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<sup>1</sup> Shlomo Riskin, *Around the Family Table*, p. 22-23

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 43:11, cited by Riskin

would become known as *מלחמת ששת הימים*, the Six-Day War.

*Binyanei Ha'Uma*, Jerusalem's convention center, was filled to capacity. Five of the country's top song writers had been commissioned to create songs. Mayor Teddy Kollek of Jerusalem had suggested that someone write a song about Jerusalem. Only one writer took up the idea: Naomi Shemer. Linda Gottlieb writes:

As she went about her daily activities, she thought about how her Polish parents spoke of their own birthplace of Vilna as "the Jerusalem of the Diaspora" – as if every other city could only be second-best. She remembered the colors, the sounds, the silent mood of Jerusalem, her childhood visits to Biblical places, closed forever to her since 1948. She thought, too, of a story from the Talmud in which the wife of the great Rabbi Akiva lived in poverty for years so that her husband might pursue his studies. When Rabbi Akiva became a famous and learned man, he rewarded his wife with a *ירושלים של זהב*, a "Jerusalem of gold," a gold brooch hammered out in the shape of the ancient city, to be worn as a symbol of her devotion.

And so *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav*, Jerusalem of Gold, became Naomi Shemer's song title. It was a song of loss, of nostalgia for the Old City now blocked by Jordanian arms. Her song began:

ירושלים של זהב ושל נחושת ושל אור  
Jerusalem of gold, of copper and of light...

And then she quoted the medieval poet Yehudah Halevi:

הלא לכל שיריך אני כינור  
Let me be a violin for all your songs.

She continued:

The water cisterns are dry,  
The marketplace is empty.  
We cannot visit our temple in the ancient city.  
Where winds wail in the rocky caves.  
Over the mountains we cannot go  
to the Dead Sea by way of Jericho.

כי שמך צורב את השפתים כנשיקת שרף  
Your name burns my lips like an angel's kiss,  
אם אשכחך ירושלים אשר כלה זהב  
Let me not forget you, O Jerusalem of Gold.

The night of the song's debut, it was sung last. A young woman, unknown to the general audience, walked out on stage and sang with just a guitar as accompaniment. At the end, the hushed audience applauded for nearly seven minutes, and then demanded to hear it again.

Meanwhile, Gamal Abdul Nasser was mobilizing his troops to put pressure on Israel. As Israel prepared for battle, Naomi Shemer's song was played over and over on the radio.

Linda Gottlieb, describing the events fifty years ago, writes:

Naomi Shemer was invited to sing her song for the troops stationed around Jerusalem. Many of the faces in her audiences she recognized – doctors, lawyers, people she saw every day in the small country of Israel. Some, she remembered, had fought in 1948 and 1956. They stood about her in a circle, with only the headlights of a truck breaking the blackness of the night, and she sang to the soldiers. Loudly,

with determination in their voices, the soldiers joined in the refrain.

And then, on June 5th, the war began. Naomi Shemer helped in her way, by singing for the troops. On Wednesday, June 7th, while in the Sinai, she heard the news, "The city of Jerusalem has been taken!" Listening to the radio, she heard the announcer describe the soldiers' block-by-block advance into the Old City. "Now some of the troops were advancing toward the Western Wall."

Then, in the background, indistinctly at first, there was the sound of a song, or, rather, a hymn, sung by what sounded like hundreds of men, in hoarse voices, gasping for breath between lines: "ירושלים של זהב ושל נחושת ושל אור, הלא לכל" "שיריך אני כינור."

Naomi Shemer, crouched by the side of an Egyptian wall, listened to the broadcast. She heard the announcer's description of the tanks and trucks coming into the city, many of them plastered with banners reading, *Yerushalayim shel Zahav*. Tears ran down her cheeks. And then she realized that she would have to write the second stanza of her song. Later that evening, at that camp in the Sinai desert, she stood up and told them: "I shall sing for you a stanza that I have just added to *Jerusalem of Gold*," because when I first wrote the song, Jerusalem was just a beautiful dream for us. And now it belongs to us!" And she sang:

חזרנו אל בורות המים לשוק ולכיכר

We have come back now to the water cisterns,

Back to the marketplace.

שופר קורא בהר הבית בעיר העתיקה

The sound of the shofar is heard

From the Wall in the ancient city,

ובמארות אשר בסלע אלפי שמשות זורחות

And from the rocky caves in the mountains,  
A thousand suns are rising.

ושוב נרד אל ים המלך בדרך יריחו

We shall go again to the Dead Sea, by way of Jericho. <sup>3</sup>

How this one song of a then obscure Israeli folksinger captured the imagination and the hearts of the Jewish people fifty years ago, reflects the status of *Yerushalayim* as the eternal capital of the Jewish people. From the time of King David in the tenth century before the common era, more than 3000 years ago, to this very moment, Jerusalem has served as the focal point for Jewish prayers, Jewish dreams, Jewish tears. During the two-thousand year period of foreign rule, we never allowed ourselves to forget Jerusalem. And so, through the centuries, Jewish homes had part of one wall unpainted, Jewish banquets had one course missing, Jewish women left one piece of jewelry unworn, as a sign of the incomplete nature of our fulfillment as long as Jerusalem was not our own.

We who were privileged to witness Jerusalem's reunification a half-century ago, the return of our people to the Western Wall, to the ancient sites of *Yerushalayim*, we need remember the millions of Jews before us who could only reach in prayer and imagination walls that we can touch. Only then can we truly appreciate how blessed we are, and offer thanks to God for having considered us worthy of being part of so priceless a moment of history.

These past seven decades of Jewish history have represented a return to normalcy, to the place where we could again experience *זמרת הארץ*, the song of our land. Reminding us of the contrast between the reality of a world with a Jewish state and our homelessness that pre-existed Israel, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes:

One of the turning points of modern history was the Evian Conference convened by President Roosevelt in July 1938. Representatives of 32 nations gathered in the French spa town, knowing that a terrible fate was about to befall the Jews of Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Gottlieb and Rabbi Daniel Pressman

Not one opened its doors. At that moment, Jews knew that they had not one square inch of the earth's surface they could call home in the Robert Frost sense as the place where, when you have to go there, they have to let you in.<sup>4</sup>

We have taught the world what it means to defy military odds, and out of desert, out of death camp, fashion a stunning, flourishing miracle.

The story is told of a meeting, during the darkest days of the Second World War, between a general and a rabbi. Depressed by a series of Allied defeats, the general asked: "How are we ever going to win this war?" The rabbi responded: "We shall win by one of two ways. We shall win either by a miracle or we shall win in a natural way."

The general then asked: "What would be the natural way?" The rabbi answered: "To win it by a miracle." The general, puzzled by the rabbi's strange answer, replied: "So what then would be the miracle?" The rabbi, smiling, answered: "To win it in a natural way."<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Samuel Schafler notes:

That's the story of the State of Israel. In 1948, in 1956 and particularly in 1967, Israel defeated its enemies on the battlefield, naturally. And that was the miracle. Today we take this miracle for granted. We consider it the most natural thing in the world for Israel to have held off [all those armies, all those enemies, time and time again].<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, what we were able to achieve naturally, what Israel has accomplished in just short of 69 years, is nothing if not miraculous. But the price paid has been steep and painful. Writer David Grossman observes: "On average, since the founding of the state one person has been killed each day, one family destroyed. There are nine hundred memorials to the war dead in this small country. There is no week on the Israeli calendar in which there is

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Jewish Review of Books*, Fall 2016, p. 45

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Samuel Schafler, Temple Gates of Prayer Bulletin, December 1969

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

not a memorial day of some sort for a traumatic event.”

In 1956, during the height of the Sinai Campaign, Israel’s second war, the legendary American news reporter, Edward R. Murrow, interviewed an Israeli soldier over C.B.S. Radio. Murrow began: “Beside me is an Israeli soldier and next to him his tank.” Murrow then describes the appearance of the soldier, his face blackened by smoke and powder. He then asks the soldier: “I know you are returning to the front almost immediately. Tell me, suppose I were God and could grant you one wish, what would you ask for?” There was a pause of a few seconds, and then the soldier replied: “If you were God and could grant my wish – I would ask you to give me tomorrow. I want to see tomorrow!”

Today, sixty years after Murrow interview, sixty-eight-and-a-half years after the establishment of the State, we can say that the soldier’s wish has been granted. Israel has effected the transition from an impoverished, tiny, insecure country to a regional superpower, strong, self-sufficient and world-leading in many areas.

This is definitely a country that has reached “tomorrow,” that has demonstrated its resilience, its staying power and its strength. Maybe that is why our enemies are so bitter, so entrenched in their hatred, because we have succeeded where they have failed. We have learned to move past pain and bitterness – is there any people in the universe more entitled to be embittered and angry than the Jewish people? — but we have learned to move past the pain and anger and build for a beautiful tomorrow.

But the success of Israel, of course, is not limited to the material, to statistics, to a spreadsheet. It goes well beyond that. Again, David Grossman:

I write all these things as someone who considers himself lucky to live in Israel – not because I think it is Utopia, but because Israel is the only place in which a Jewish person can live with the vital ingredients of the history and culture and mental life of all the generations of Jews that have preceded him, and can realize them in the

creation of a new and modern reality. This is also the place in which a Jewish person can implement the values and ideals that his culture has crystallized, and it is the only place in which he can formulate this for himself in the language in which his identity was created over many generations—the Hebrew language, which preserves all the codes of his past and renews itself day by day.

Living in Israel is, for me, still a spiritual adventure. It may be exhausting and frustrating, but how could I do without it? Sometimes I remind myself that my day-to-day life constitutes the object of longing and hope of eighty generations of Jews who lived before me. My children play and love and fight in a language that no one spoke for two thousand years, but for them it is full of life and is taken for granted. Were Abraham the patriarch (who would now be four thousand years old) to sit down for supper at my house, he would understand the greater part of the Hebrew spoken by my five-year-old daughter. What a wonder that is!<sup>7</sup>

The reborn State of Israel is the proof that the hopes of previous generations in those who would follow them, were never in vain.

Without Israel, we would have remained, in the words of a noted historian, “the ever-dying people.” With Israel, *ig l`xyi mr* – we are a people more alive and more vibrant than ever.

Without Israel, we would be a people dependent upon the kindness of others to survive – kindness that never got us too far in the past. With Israel, we determine our future.

You know, some of most successful Israel Bond campaigns have been during years of distress, when war threatened, or in time of war itself. Then we couldn't pledge fast enough, or pay off those pledges quickly enough.

But now, during better times, we feel less pressure, and, sometimes, less incentive, to buy

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<sup>7</sup> David Grossman, *Jerusalem Post* op-ed, date unknown.

Bonds.

Here again, it is crucial that we remember that today, we can rejoice in that Israel is a stronger country, not lying on the brink of catastrophe. Sure, there are no shortage of problems – we have a tough time getting along with ourselves, as recent months have shown, and we are situated in a difficult neighborhood, to say the least. Israel's security forces lead the world in thwarting terrorist attacks, but we still face of the challenge of death-worshipping enemies who seek out opportunities to wreak terror on our citizens and on our land. We face world-wide efforts to delegitimize Israel, thankfully opposed by our national and local leaders, and by good people who understand the age-old reason for those de-legitimization-attempts, which are none other than a twenty-first century revitalization of classical anti-Semitism. Our young people on college and university campuses find themselves placed on the defensive when expressing their love for Israel, and are prevented from supporting other human-rights causes, by those who view Zionism, or, frankly, Jewishness, as a disqualifying taint.

Problems notwithstanding, Israel today, thank God, is not the impoverished child of decades ago. Israel thrives as a technological, industrial, agricultural model for nations world-wide. That's why, today, we are not asked for a *neduvah*, for a handout, to support a poor cousin who, God forbid, will shrivel away without our help. Rather, we are being asked to join hands with a winner, a strong success story of a country that has given us reason to smile, to laugh, to experience a renewed pride in our Jewishness that may not have been felt since the days of the *Batei Mikdash* – the great Temples millennia ago.

We are privileged to be part of this new page in our long history. A page filled with triumph, accomplishment and hope. We desperately want to be part of that page, to be at least a note in the margins of this glorious moment of Jewish destiny.

How do we do it? How do we become part of this new page? Not by defending Israel's borders – our Israeli brothers and sisters dedicate themselves to that difficult, and risk-

filled task. Some of your children and grandchildren have taken up that challenge, and we are so proud of them, and of you as well, for raising them with love of Israel, and for courageously weathering the fear that goes hand-in-hand with having children on the front lines.

So how do we, those of us not manning the front lines, become part of this new page of Jewish history? By asserting our relationship with Israel, and, in so doing, reaffirming our commitment to a Jewish world of smiles, of laughter, of new life, of limitless hope.

How do we become part of this new page of Jewish history? By putting our money where our heart is – by investing in Israel's infrastructure. So take the tab card. Purchase to the maximum of your ability. This is not charity. Bonds are a good, secure investment. This is not charity – this is involvement.

Some of those precious souls for whom *Yizkor* is about to be said, could only have dreamt of a time when Jews would be free to exercise their Jewish selves. They could only have dreamt of a time when there would again be Jewish sovereignty, when we would be free, independent, strong, in our own land. We who are living the dream of those who came before us owe it to them to remain worthy of what was achieved through their prayers, their tears, their love, their dedication.

Let us help make ourselves worthy of the faith and prayers of those who proceeded us. Let's become part of this new, exciting, challenging page of Jewish history. Let's do so by turning down the tab on the card. It's so easy. It's so important. Let's do it now.