

יום כיפור יזכור תשע"ח
YOM KIPPUR YIZKOR 5778
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When the Prince of Coucy, of Northern France, was about to embark on one of the final crusades, in a futile attempt to capture the Holy Land from the Moslems, he visited his friend, the rabbi of Coucy, asking him what he would like brought back to him from Jerusalem. The rabbi told the prince: "I would ask that you bring me back some sign of life from Jerusalem, so that I know that the holy city has not been forsaken, a sign of vitality that will strengthen my belief in the revival of Jerusalem and in the return of my people from exile to the land promised them so long ago.

The prince agreed to the rabbi's request and departed. Years later, he returned home, and paid another visit to his friend, the rabbi. He handed the rabbi the gift he had promised, the sign of life the rabbi had requested. What was the gift? A wilted flower. "In all of Jerusalem," the prince told the rabbi, "I could not find anything with a spark of life in it. The city has been devastated, it is completely desolate and in ruins. But on Mount Zion, I found this wilted flower. I tried to revive it with water, but to no avail. It is the only thing I could find that at least once, had life attached to it.

The rabbi took hold of the wilted flower in trembling hands. He pressed it against his lips, with tears rolling down his eyes. As soon as his tears touched the flower, miraculously, the petals opened and the flower blossomed. The rabbi understood what had happened, and, so too, did the prince, who commented: "I see now that, dried and desolate, Zion awaits the return of her children, whose tears will bring her back to life, through whom, once again, she will blossom and flourish."¹

¹ Source unknown

Israeli writer Amos Oz offers his recollection of a Jerusalem night, seventy years ago, in late November of 1947, when the United Nations had voted to allow for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, with thirty-three in favor, thirteen against, ten abstentions. He writes:

After a couple of seconds of shock and disbelief ... our far-away street in Northern Jerusalem roared all at once in a terrifying shout that tore through the darkness and the buildings and the trees, piercing itself ... a cataclysmic shout, a shout that could shift rocks, that could freeze your blood, as though all the dead who had ever died here and all those still to die had received a brief window to shout, and the next moment the scream of horror was replaced by roars of joy and a medley of hoarse cries and “*Am Yisrael Hai*,” and somebody trying to sing *Hatikvah*, and women shrieking and clapping.... My father and my mother were standing there hugging each other like two children lost in the woods, as I had never seen them before or since.

[Later that night] my father said to me as we wandered [through the festivities in the center of town], me riding on his shoulders: “Just you look, my boy [he said], take a very good look, son, take it all in, because you won’t forget this night to your dying day and you’ll tell your children, your grandchildren about this night when we’re long gone.”²

It is clear that what young Amos, at the age of eight, witnessed that November night, was, until that day, the greatest moment of celebration in two thousand years of Jewish history. There was little time to celebrate, of course, because of the hostility of all of Israel’s surrounding neighbors. Less than six months later, in May of 1948, when Ben Gurion proclaimed the state, war began almost immediately.

² Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Harcourt, 2004, pp. 356-359

Amos Oz's memoir does not burst with sentiments of joy, the brief interlude I cited notwithstanding. His personal biography, and, of course, the ongoing history of our people, endured crisis after crisis, challenge after challenge. It was clear that the story of the Princy of Coucy was correct, that it would take tears, oceans of tears, to bring the flower back to life, to bring our Jewish state into vibrant existence.

I return to France where I began, but now to the southern city of Sète, a popular tourist site, the largest French fishing port on the Mediterranean. Vacation guides will highlight its fine restaurants, its quality hotels, its extensive boating facilities. What you are unlikely to find is mention of an event that occurred there seventy years ago this past summer, just four months before the United Nations' vote on partition and the jubilation detailed by Amos Oz.

The date: July 10, 1947, a date that would change the course of Jewish history. It was at the French port of Sète that 4550 Jewish refugees were brought together, on hundreds of trucks, from displaced persons' camps throughout Europe. They would be boarding a decommissioned American warship, that, before the war, had functioned as a luxury steamship, that had ferried passengers up and down the Chesapeake River in Maryland and Virginia.

On this July day, seven decades ago, the President Warfield was no longer the luxury ship that offered the finest of creature comforts to its privileged travelers. It was no longer the warship, witness to the battle of Normandy, and other pivotal events of the Second World War. Now, retrofitted by its new owner, the *Haganah*, the President Warfield would bear no resemblance to the days when its passenger load was up to three hundred and fifty. In July of 1947, passengers and crew would number some five thousand people.

The journey begun that hot summer day seven decades ago would be more dangerous than any of its participants would imagine. Their voyage, as part of *Briḥah*, the Jewish escape from the death-grounds of Europe to what was destined to become the State of Israel, was escorted by British destroyers, who were hell-bent on not allowing these Jewish refugees entrée into British-mandate controlled Palestine.

The *Haganah*, notwithstanding the dangers of flouting British warnings, had organized the trip in an incredibly thorough fashion. Arranging transport of all of the refugees to Sète, even in today's age of instantaneous electronic communication, would have been a mind-boggling challenge – let alone, in the primitive, post-war conditions that they confronted in 1947, and with the need to maintain as much secrecy and discretion as possible when so many people and logistics were involved. The *Haganah* had organized doctors, eight of whom were among the refugees, and thirty nurses, in addition to their crew of American and Israeli volunteers, and had managed to purchase the President Warfield, and renovate it so that it could accommodate more than ten times the occupancy than its original builders had intended.

The conditions of the journey, understandably, were horribly difficult. All of the health problems that resulted with so many people in such hot and unsanitary conditions, coupled with the constant threat posed by the British vessels that were surrounding them, made for an incredibly harrowing experience.

Nat Nadler, a twenty-year old electrician, one of the American volunteers, in a radio interview,³ recalled that there were six pregnant women on board the ship. On consecutive days, two of these women delivered babies on the ship. Both babies were born healthy, but one of the mothers died in childbirth, and was buried at sea. Nat Nadler, this tough, no-nonsense, fearless soldier, broke down in tears as he described how the surviving mother nursed both babies.

You likely never heard of a ship called the President Warfield. On the fifth day of this hazardous journey, the crew and passengers wanted to change the name of the ship. Other *Haganah* ships had commemorated fallen heroes, so that suggestion was made to call the ship Mordecai Anilewicz, after the heroic twenty-four year old leader of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Others wanted to name it המרד העברי, the Jewish Rebellion. But the *Haganah* leadership, with whom the ship captain was in contact, had made their own decision as to the most appropriate name, one that the crew and passengers readily accepted. The ship would no longer be known as the President Warfield, rather, יציאת אירופה תש"ז - *Exodus 1947*.

The story of the Exodus was popularized by the 1958 Leon Uris novel, and, in 1960 by the Otto Preminger movie, starring the young Paul Newman. But the real story was far more tragic, more painful, than the fictionalized version. The *Exodus 1947* never made it to Israel... the British attacked it ferociously a few miles off the coast of Israel, and brought the badly wounded ship to Haifa Harbor, where the exhausted, hungry, ill passengers had a glimpse of the land of their dreams, the land that finally was so close, but still not open to them. To the amazement of onlookers, these terribly unwell refugees, before being removed from the Exodus, stood and sang *Hatikvah*. The British then forced all of the passengers onto three British prison

³ *Exodus '47: Inside Out*, PRX Public Radio

boats, and, rather than take the 5000 to Cyprus, as expected, sent them back, in horrific conditions, to France. The French, unlike the British, in these times, were more sympathetic to Jewish concerns, and refused to force the passengers to disembark. They remained on board the ships, in French waters, for three weeks, until the British transported the refugees back to prison camps in Germany.

Here is how the New York Times, a newspaper not known for its sympathy to Jewish issues during those years, described the stand-off at Sète, France:

Although the refugees lived under unbearable physical strain and suffered mental anguish equally great, no one disembarked [in France] except a handful that needed hospital care. It was a point the British could never understand. It was also an example of the highest moral courage, matched only – inversely – by the cynicism and callousness of the British.⁴

Why did the vast majority of the passengers refuse to leave the British boats in France, when the French offered them medical care, comfort, and even refuge, when most of the world was still closing its doors to Jews? Because they had only one destination in mind, a land that would be truly theirs, where they would no longer have to depend upon the kindness and generosity of others, kindness and generosity that their own experience taught them, were in painfully short supply. There would be no destination-change, they, come hell or high-water (or both), would settle only for what would become the State of Israel. And most of the 4550 Jews on the Exodus eventually made it to Israel, because no other place on earth, at that moment in history, for them, would suffice.

⁴ Thomas Lask, *The New York Times*, September 19, 1948

Historians have viewed the voyage of Exodus 1947 as a defeat transformed into victory. Indeed, יציאת אירופה תש"ז - *Exodus 1947*, led directly to the establishment of the State of Israel. It turned much of the world against the British, whose cruelty to us in those years remains unforgivable. It led to the crumbling of the British mandate, and to the United Nations' decision in November 1947, to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. But far more important than its political and strategic ramifications, the determination of the 4550, the courage of the volunteer crew, the leadership of the *Haganah*, the *Palmaḥ*, the *Irgun*, reflected a new Jewish spirit that frankly, shocked the living daylights out of the world. Gone was the passive Jew of years past, the Jew whose protest against the inequities of history was limited to drowning out the name of Haman during the Purim *Megillah* reading – or in German synagogues, as was the custom, writing the name of Haman in chalk on the soles of their shoes, and, during the reading, quietly rubbing their shoes on the floor, erasing the name. That level of protest, after what we experienced in the Shoah, would never again, be good enough.

People would die on the *Exodus*, but, don't forget, two babies were also born, babies, who, in years to come, would proudly serve in Israel's armed forces.

This year, several milestone anniversaries of significant events in Israel's short history will occur, in addition to the seventieth anniversary of *Exodus 1947*. Last May, we observed the fiftieth *Yom Yerushalayim*, marking fifty years since the reunification of Jerusalem during the Six Day War. Last month, we marked the 120th anniversary of the First Zionist Congress, in Basle, Switzerland, at which Theodor Herzl put forth his vision of a Jewish State.

This coming November 29 will mark seventy years since the United Nations vote in favor of a partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. Twenty years ago, on *Motzei Shabbat*, November 29, 1997, there were celebrations commemorating that historic vote in the major cities throughout Israel, including a special concert of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Before the performance, a film was shown of the vote that had taken place exactly fifty years earlier, including a recording of the vote as it had taken place. The vote had been 33 in favor, 13 against, 10 abstentions. And then the lights went on in the Mann Auditorium. The mayor of Tel Aviv came out on stage. Invited to the performance as guests of the State of Israel were the ambassadors of the thirty-three countries that had voted in favor 50 years ago. And as each name was called out, and as each Ambassador rose, there was a massive outpouring of applause and accolades.

It seemed as if everyone was standing and applauding, with tears in their eyes. It had to have occurred to many of those present that some of these countries to whom Israel was expressing her gratitude—countries like Russia, Czechoslovakia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Iceland, Liberia, Poland, Uruguay, Venezuela, were countries that had done very little to support Israel in the last 50 years. And yet, here it was, 50 years later, and Israel was still recognizing and thanking them for their vote of support. The people of Israel were not asking, “What have you done for us lately?” Rather, they were grateful for that desperately needed support in 1947.

The forthcoming seventieth anniversary of the vote this November will feature a similar ceremony of recognition, in which leaders of major Jewish organizations will visit the UN, and divide into thirty-three groups, in order to meet with the delegations of each country that voted yes seventy years ago, and to thank them for their support at that most critical moment. I am proud to be leading the Rabbinical Assembly delegation, and was able to influence the choice of the country we will be honoring – which will be Canada.

It is easy to forget, at times, how young Israel really is – now in its seventieth year of statehood. Those of us who visit frequently marvel at the rapidity of change, the speed of growth, the extent of development; those who return to Israel after an absence of ten or twenty years are overwhelmed by the transformations that occur in every sphere; those who visit for the first time, are amazed by the vibrancy, the beauty, the modernity surrounded by the authenticity of an ancient past. That all of this has happened, with Israel under constant threat from enemies literally on all sides, is nothing short of miraculous.

Yes, the State of Israel is, by all measures, a very young country. But we have come a long way since *Exodus 1947*, since our desperate refugees from the killing fields of Europe could only sing *Hatikvah* while staring at the shores of Israel from afar. Today, virtually no Jew anywhere in the world is prevented from living in Israel.

And today, notwithstanding the security concerns, and issues of war and peace, and the increasingly remote prospects of reconciliation with a terribly difficult enemy and a religious philosophy, that, opposite to our own, worships death and praises murder, and relentless hostility to Israel in so many quarters world-wide – notwithstanding all of this difficulty and frustration – Israel today, represents one of human history's greatest success stories.

At this sacred hour, before *Yizkor* prayers are said, it is our long-standing tradition to focus on ways in which we can help Israel in a substantive way. Beyond *tzedakah*, beyond gifts, we turn again to our annual *State of Israel Bonds* appeal. Bond purchases are not in conflict with charity, they are an investment, with good return, both financial and spiritual – because our purchases help the State of Israel in its

major development projects. Often, something as simple of transferring retirement funds to an Israel Bonds vehicle, can be of great benefit to Israel.

Bond purchases are an opportunity to recognize the courage of 4550 Jewish men, women and children, who, seventy years ago, were prepared to devote heart and soul to bringing an ancient dream to life. Bond purchases are an opportunity to recognize and appreciate countries such as Canada who have stood by Israel from her earliest day, and those that continue to do so, often in the face of pressures to withhold or to limit that support. Bond purchases are an opportunity to show faith in the land that came to be because of faith, because of a stubborn refusal by our forebears to relinquish belief in a Jewish tomorrow; an opportunity to show confidence in our brothers and sisters who continue to shape a country that works, notwithstanding these times and tensions; and, maybe most important, an opportunity to demonstrate to ourselves, our families, our community, our belief that, more than anywhere else, our trust, our future, is guaranteed in Israel. Bond purchases are an opportunity to demonstrate that we have moved beyond the day when tears were the essential nutrient of the flowering of renewed Jewish statehood. Today it is Jewish technical, strategic, intellectual and physical ingenuity, together with a mega-dose of courage, tenacity and will, that have led to the flourishing, astonishing Jewish presence on today's geographical map.

The late Abba Kovner, hero of the Vilna Ghetto, resistance fighter, a lead organizer of בריחה, the illegal rescue of hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees of the Holocaust to Israel, culminating in Exodus 1947, and, also, poet and writer, was one of the founders of בית התפוצות, the Diaspora Museum at Tel Aviv University. Kovner, himself, designed one special corner of the museum, known as "The Minyan." The

exhibit consisted of nine wax figures, representing Jews from all over the world, praying together.

Of course, there was an apparent problem with this exhibit. A *minyan* is ten, not nine. Abba Kovner explained, how, after the war, in Israel, living on a Kibbutz, he felt very alone. He missed all of his family, friends, and fellow fighters who fell in the war, and grieved for the thousands already lost in the battle to establish Israel. In that time of aloneness, a Jew approached Kovner, asking him to be the tenth in a *minyan*. Kovner, not a religious Jew by any stretch of the imagination, agreed, and became the tenth. And that seemingly trivial moment in his life changed him forever, for it taught him that he was not alone, that he was part of the larger *minyan* of כלל ישראל, that he belonged to something far greater than himself.

And so, why only nine figures in the exhibit at the Diaspora Museum? Kovner wanted the viewer, the visitor, to become that tenth, to know that the exhibit, indeed, the nation, would not be complete, would not be a functional whole, without his, without her involvement.

On this Day of Atonement, at this hour of Yizkor, of remembering what, and who, brought us to this moment of life, of history, we too, have to be part of that sacred *minyan*. We have to do what history demands of us, something maybe as simple as folding a tab on a card, but something as important as insuring our presence in the eternal minyan of the people of Israel.