

Dov and Arlein Chetner Chai Essay Competition 2009

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Israel at 60: How has it made a difference?

The creation of the state of Israel has had profound bearing on many aspects of global society. Israel is a small country, less than half the size of the province of Nova Scotia, but the volume of its impact on the world makes it seem larger than Canada. No other country in the world has outperformed its size and physical limitations like Israel. It speaks to Israel's fight and vitality that not only it remains to this day through war and conflict, but also thrives as one of the world's foremost industrial nations. So how has Israel made a difference in the world? This piece of writing will examine this question from three broad but important angles. First, socially and politically, I will examine the significance of Israel being the only democratic country in the Middle East. Next, I will discuss Israel's accomplishments as a nation through industry and innovation. Finally, I will discuss Israel's very personal impact on myself and how Israel has made a difference in my life and why.

In 1948, not only was the first modern Jewish State created, but also the first democratic nation in the Middle East. Unlike nearly all of Israel's neighbors, this granted the citizens of Israel (both Jewish and not Jewish) the right to vote for representatives in government. From its inception, this has brought much conflict to the region. As a representative democracy, Israeli citizens enjoy universal suffrage whether you are black or white, gay or straight, Jewish or Muslim. As long as you are citizen of Israel over the

age of 18, you have a vote in who represents you in Israel's Knesset. This idea is unfathomable considering the area of the world Israel is situated in. In most of Israel's neighboring countries, many of its citizens lack basic rights, let alone the ability to vote in any sort of election.

So how has this made a difference? Despite widespread criticism of Israel, the world has begun to witness some of the terrible human rights violations Israel's neighbors perform. The freedoms in Israel are profound compared to its neighbors. Israeli's enjoy many liberties that close neighbors could not even fathom. In no other country in the region will you find the press so free to criticize their own government. Jerusalem has one of the biggest gay pride parades in the world while in neighboring countries people are tortured for being gay. These are just a couple of examples of the freedoms Israeli's enjoy.

Israeli society is known for its exceptional contribution to global innovation in many important fields from arts and culture to science and technology. For the former, Israel is a world leader. There are more museums in Israel per capita than anywhere else in the world. Israeli films are commonly featured at many of the world's top film festivals and Israeli music is unique and recognizable throughout the world.

For a country as small as Israel, advances in sciences have been tremendous. In 1948 the Israeli desert (which covered a majority of the area in the south) was unlivable. Through Israeli technologies, most importantly, drip irrigation, the country has managed to make the desert not only habitable but also has helped it flourish. The technology of drip irrigation has helped Israel produce more crops wasting less water. But how has it made a difference? The technology has been shared with developing countries that have

often struggled to feed its ballooning populations. In this way, Israel is sharing its technology to make the world a better place.

This essay would not be fulfilling without talking about Israel's affect on my own life, as a proud Jewish Canadian, as a son of two Israeli-born immigrants to Canada. Apart from growing up and living in Canada, Israel has had the most profound impact on me. Without Israel, I would surely not be alive today. I am not totally unique in this circumstance, of course. There are millions of people, who, without Israel, without a home for the Jewish people, would not be around today.

Many European Jews, seeking refuge from the growing animosity towards Europe's Jews in the first part of the 20th century were faced with rejection from countries around the world when trying to emigrate. This further drove the need for a Jewish Homeland where Jews could always feel welcome no matter what difficult situation they may find themselves in. Even when the Nazi's came to power in 1933 in Germany and began implementing Antisemitic policies, nations across the world would not accept Jews. Many Jews managed to immigrate to Palestine to seek refuge and start a new life. Even before this time, many Jews saw Palestine as a refuge, a way of escaping persecution. My family was no different. During the Russian Pogroms my maternal great grandfather fled with his family to make home in Palestine. He carried with him a torah all the way to Israel where he settled and started a community with similar Jews. He knew at that time the impact Israel could have – how it could be a safe haven for Jews fleeing persecution. Years later, after the election of Hitler, my paternal grandfather fled by himself to Palestine to start a tough life. It was not easy for him, but it was a life nonetheless. His six siblings and two parents all perished by the hands of the Nazis. By

1948, my family in Israel managed to make a life for themselves. My father was born less than a year after the State was declared and my mother was born a year later. Without the creation of the State of Israel, I would not be here today. Without its creation, my grandfather would have nowhere to escape and would have gone the way of his family. Without its creation, my family would have surely suffered even longer from the Russian Pogroms. Palestine, in both instances, represented a hope, an escape, and a better way of life for Jews facing persecution.

This past summer, two Ethiopian Israelis were brought in to work at the Jewish summer camp that I work at. At first hesitant as I had never met Ethiopian Israelis, I became completely enamored by their story of how they and their families moved to Israel when they were young to escape conflicts in their home countries. It wasn't until then that I realized Israel's continued importance to Jews around the world. I understood that Israel was so much more than a refuge for Jews after the Holocaust but it continues to be a refuge for Jews who are looking for a home.

On my Bar Mitzvah I read from the Torah my great grandfather carried with him from Russia. In the Jewish religion, when you turn thirteen you become a man. But it is not until I sat down to write this essay, eight years after I became a man that I understood the true significance of what it meant to have a Bar Mitzvah in a free and democratic Jewish nation, only 60 years after the near destruction of European Jewry, reading from a Torah that my great grandfather carried with him from Russia. That is how Israel has made a difference. Israel has made many significant impacts on the world but for myself, it has given me a sense of place, a sense of pride and understanding that cannot be learned by conventional means, only through experience.