

Dov and Arlein Chetner Chai Essay Competition 2009

1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner – Prize of \$2,700

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### **Israel at 60: How Has It Made a Difference?**

I remember: as a child, I used to come home from school in the afternoons and find my family watching the news. Invariably, “the news” entailed something about Israel, and I would sit and pout in front of the television, waiting for the newscaster’s dry litany to end so that I could get on with the more important business of wolfing down Oreo cookies and watching the latest episode of *Full House*. “Isn’t there anything *else* going on in the world?” I would whine as I waited. “Why do they always have to talk about *Israel*?”

Today, it no longer comes as a surprise to me that Israel attracts so much of the world’s attention. As the only democracy in the Middle East, it makes sense for the eyes of the media to be glued to that little strip of land and its inhabitants. Ever since its inception, Israel has challenged preconceived notions about what can reasonably be expected of a Middle Eastern country. A flourishing economy? Barren deserts made to bloom? World-class academic and research institutions? A commitment to human rights and democratic values? In its sixty years of existence, Israel has made a difference to the world at large, by overcoming fantastic odds, by destabilizing expectations and assumptions, and by raising the bar for political and ethical discourse across the globe.

Given the wide-scale ripples that Israel has engendered on the world stage, it is often easy to overlook the difference that Israel has made in the lives of its own creators: the Jewish People. Yet the fact is that the existence of Israel has transformed the Jewish People, both in the Land and in the Diaspora, on multiple levels: culturally, religiously, and psychologically. It is this small-scale yet extremely palpable difference that I would like to highlight here.

Years before the State of Israel was born, Ahad Ha'am (1856-1927) articulated a vision of what that State could mean. He longed for an Israel that would serve to revitalize and invigorate Jewish culture, by revamping the Hebrew language, enriching its store of literature and music, and stimulating the rediscovery of core Jewish values. He envisioned Israel as the center from which the culture of Judaism would radiate out to the Diaspora, reminding Jews everywhere of the full richness and relevance of their ancient tradition. Today, sixty years after the creation of the State of Israel, there can be no doubt that Ahad Ha'am's vision has been realized. The Jewish homeland has served, and continues to serve, as a cultural beacon. On its soil, literary masters such as Shai Agnon, Leah Goldberg and Amos Oz have taken root and given forth fruit; they have rearticulated the age-old passions of the Jewish People, providing new poetry to harbor our most ancient dreams. Israel, too, has transformed the Jewish musical landscape, giving us everything from the soft ballads of Naomi Shemer to the hyper-contemporary rap of Hadag Nachash. Through these cultural and artistic works, the Hebrew language has been reawakened from a sleep of two thousand years; that language has radiated out into the Diaspora and found its ways onto the tongues of Jewish children in Buenos

Aires, New York City, Calgary, Budapest – and the list goes on. This Israeli-grown culture has served as a rallying point for world Jewry, reminding us that Judaism can be modern, fun, beautiful, and profoundly relevant. It reminds us that Judaism is about more than just religious beliefs – it is about a People, an *Am Yisrael* whose Jewishness permeates all aspects of their being and all the spaces they inhabit, from the synagogues of Jerusalem’s Old City to the concert halls and discotheques of Tel Aviv.

If Israel has reminded us that Judaism is more than a religion, it has also revamped our ways of thinking about religion itself, and our ways of practicing it. One of the things that have always struck me most about Jewish life in Israel is the shocking lack of dichotomy between Israelis’ identities as Jews, on the one hand, and as citizens of the contemporary world, on the other. The gap between “religious” and “secular” aspects of life, I find, is so much narrower in the Israeli consciousness than it is in that of Diaspora Jews. For a Jew living in Israel, Jewishness is the status quo; it is a fundamental layer of identity that need not constantly be asserted as distinct from (or in opposition to) the secular layer of identity. Religious holidays are inscribed into the country’s calendar. The city buses are plastered with stickers bearing quotes from the book of Leviticus: “Honor your elders”, the stickers proclaim, and the young passengers obey by vacating their seats when an elderly person comes on board. Religion and secular life are intertexts that penetrate one another, that serve as commentary on each other, forming a constant dialogue in which Israeli Jews are always enmeshed.

This fusion of religion and secularity in Israeli society has transformed the possibilities of what it means to practice Judaism today. Any Jew who experiences this Israeli fusion is taught an incredible lesson: our religion does not have to be separate from, or in opposition to, “the rest of our lives”. We don’t have to suffer the cognitive dissonance that comes with that kind of dichotomous living. The religious Jew need no longer be the pale, hunched-over yeshiva student of the Polish ghetto; he or she can be steeped in Jewish texts and rituals *and* be an athlete *and* go to the movies *and* be a cosmopolitan citizen of the world. This holistic approach to religion, I believe, benefits practitioners by enabling us to live religiously without suffering from a feeling of “split identity”.

Of course, I do not mean to suggest that religious life in Israel is uncomplicated, or that there exists no tension between religion and secularity. Every Jew has a different way of navigating the overlap between the various spheres of life, and that navigation is often loaded with tension. But the fact that the Jewish religion forms such an integrated part of secular Israeli society – almost to the point of blurring the boundary between “religious” and “secular” – diminishes the need to understand our religiousness as a starkly separate endeavor. Over the course of its sixty years of existence, the State of Israel has reminded Diaspora Jews of this vital truth: the Jewish religion is meant to be an identity that animates and encompasses *all* the pieces that go into making us human beings – the physical, spiritual, political, artistic, and even the so-called “secular”.

Having discussed the ways in which Israel has made a difference both culturally and religiously, I would like to point out the ways in which Israel's existence makes a difference psychologically. Over the course of the past two thousand years in exile, the Jewish People suffered terrible discrimination and persecution. Stripped of the rights to autonomous government in our own homeland, we were forced to wander and tiptoe at the margins of society. While there were periods when we flourished in tandem with our Gentile neighbors, there were also long, dark intervals during which we were systematically crushed, both physically and spiritually. The vulnerability inherent in this experience, I believe, was imprinted onto the collective Jewish psyche over the centuries.

The birth of the State of Israel has signaled, in many ways, a psychological rebirth for the Jewish People. No longer a minority population living in exile, we have become a majority in our own homeland. Slowly but surely, this new situation has helped to alleviate the sense of anxiety bred by the exilic experience. Persecution may not entirely be a thing of the past, but at the very least, Jews know that they are no longer defenseless.

The reality of being a majority in one's homeland definitely helps to alleviate the anxiety of minority status; it also helps to correct some of the psychological postures that have been the result of that anxiety. As medieval and early modern Jewish polemics demonstrate, the Jews' feeling of vulnerability sometimes (and perhaps understandably) bred contempt for their Gentile neighbors. It also caused the Jews to dig their heels in more deeply where interreligious boundaries were concerned; very strict laws developed around the mixing of Jews and non-Jews, and along with this came a certain measure of

insularity and parochialism. With the creation of the State of Israel, however, the Jewish People – now a majority in their own homeland – could psychologically afford to reevaluate these nervous attitudes. With Jewish religious and ethnic identity no longer under attack (at least not in such a drastic way), a greater openness to the wider world becomes possible.

Being a majority in one's own homeland has its benefits, and in the sixty years since Israel was created, the Jewish People have reaped them – culturally, religiously and psychologically. But being in such a position of power also carries with it a serious risk – namely, the risk of forgetting what it is like to be a vulnerable minority, a stranger in a foreign land. As the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel is faced with the very unique and difficult challenge of protecting itself, even as it protects the minorities within it. Not without reason, then, has Israel been a focus of media attention since its inception.

The existence of Israel has made a great difference, not only to the Jewish People, but to the world at large. It has proven that an exiled and persecuted nation can return to its homeland after two thousand years, and, with incredible force of will, make the deserts bloom. It has taught the world that things are rarely as beyond repair as we think they are. It has changed the world by daring to walk across a very thin tightrope – the tightrope that is democratic government in the Middle East – and to walk it solo. By doing so, Israel challenges us all to question our assumptions, and to ask anew: just what is possible? What is desert? What can we make bloom? And if we will it, will it one day no longer be a legend?