

Dov and Arlein Chetner Chai Essay Competition 2009
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Israel at 60: How has it made a difference?

Israel has created a new image of the Jew in the world - the image of a working and an intellectual people, of a people that can fight with heroism.
David ben Gurion

It is difficult for someone born after the creation of Israel to fully understand what the world was like before Israel existed. Throughout my lifetime, Israel has been a major international power, both politically and economically, and through its tourism and strong military.

To my generation, Israel is a tropical place to visit. A place to tour around during Spring Break with a Birthright tour, to eat pita and falafel and to buy discounted *Naot* sandals. Most Jewish people my age take the existence of the country for granted, and do not sit around, ruminating on how our world would be different had the State of Israel never come into existence. Surely, we think, one tiny land – even if it is *our* land – all the way on the other side of the world does not greatly affect the path of our daily life.

This attitude is mistaken. By its very existence, Israel has made a profound difference in the life of every Jew on earth. It has redefined what it means to be a Jew, and has perhaps saved the very future of Judaism.

To fully comprehend the importance of the State of Israel, and to understand how its existence has made a difference for the Jewish people and in the world at large, we must first remember what the world was like just over sixty years ago:

In Europe, in 1948, the Nazi occupation had been over for many months. However, life for those Jews still trapped in Europe was not back to normal. From the Communist regime in Eastern Europe to bloody pogroms in Poland, staying alive was still a constant struggle.

Concentration camp survivors were stuffed into Displaced Persons camps around the continent, and the few survivors who had rejoined society spent all their time eking out a precarious living. The remnants of European Jewry were struggling to survive, frightened and largely powerless, many of them simply biding time until they could receive the required visas and papers to immigrate elsewhere.

In Canada and America, frightened by the horrors of the Holocaust, secular Jews were working hard to assimilate. Although openly practicing their religion was not perilous to their safety, both behavioral and attitudinal anti-Semitism was the norm in the justice system, in schools and workplaces. Jews were banned from country clubs and service clubs. With notable exceptions, many North American Jews were trying their hardest to assimilate into the Gentile society.

In early 1948, many Jews were already in what was then called Palestine. They were fueled by the dream of a Jewish Homeland, but they had no legal power. Under first the Turks and then the British rule, bearing arms for protection – even during a direct attack – was illegal and punishable by prison and even execution.

These are just a few of the stories of World Jewry in 1948. There are many more: Pockets of forgotten Jews were hidden in the craggy mountains of Ethiopia. Hundreds of tired European immigrants and young Jews, eager to till the land in Palestine were detained by the British at camps in Cyprus. Far away in Barbados, Argentina, South Africa and Australia there were Jewish communities. Aside from occasional international gatherings, each one was separate from each other and largely autonomous.

Then, in 1948, the State of Israel was born.

In 1948, with the creation of Israel, the Jewish world changed.

For some Jews, this change was immediately apparent: the last struggling Jews in Europe were able to stop waiting for a Visa. Passage to Israel was arranged, and any Jew who wished to go there was welcomed into Israel with full citizenship. Young pioneers incarcerated at Cyprus were released, and members of the Haganah and Irgun who had been locked up for defending their land and family were immediately set free.

Each dispirited Holocaust survivor who arrived in Israel, each young man or woman imprisoned unjustly by the British found their life irrevocably changed by the very creation of Israel. Yet Israel has made even more of a difference than that. As I stated at the beginning of this essay, the very existence of Israel has changed the path of Jewry, in many ways.

The first product of having a Jewish state was a renewed sense of identity. North Americans who had assimilated into Gentile society suddenly reassessed their values. Being Jewish didn't just mean having a Bar Mitzvah and then running out the next day for a ham sandwich. Practicing Jews weren't all dressed in black, with wool coats, hats and earlocks. In Israel, soldiers wore *yamulkas*. Israeli musicians composed popular

songs to verses from the Old Testament, and soldiers carried prayer books. Being Jewish was *cool*. Even the Jews who spoke out against Zionism and criticized the new Jewish State sure could not contain a glimmer of pride at the strong, confident Israelis building a new land.

To some Jews – those in Ethiopia and other African countries – the creation of Israel (once the news finally reached their remote villages) did more than simply instill a sense of Jewish pride. To these Jews, Israel was the answer to centuries of prayers. Years later, during Operation Moses, when these Jews were finally secreted ‘home’ to Israel, they could not believe that they no longer needed to worship clandestinely. For them, it was as if the *Moshiah* had arrived.

Another result of the creation of Israel was an international link between the Jewish communities. Jews from Uruguay, from New Zealand and Morocco all met in the Land of Israel, and even if they were simply visiting the land they returned to their courtiers with a sense of brotherhood with these far-off communities.

The relative ease with which Germany carried out the Holocaust on the Jews of Europe was horrifying. There was no Jewish defense force in Europe, and barely any historical records of Jews fighting back when threatened. The Jews of Europe were artists, scholars, doctors, lawyers and many other professions, but they were seldom soldiers. In the state of Israel, army service is mandatory. All of the young Israeli men and woman learn how to shoot a gun, how to defend themselves when threatened with physical harm.

To the rest of the world, the image of a young Jew is no longer a frail young man, pale from years of closeted study. In Israel, the youth were tall and tanned. They were

fiery, impetuous, cheery and outgoing. These men and women were handsome and healthy, fiercely loyal to their young country, and well able to defend its borders. This new image of Jewish youth cultured a sense of Jewish pride in the next generation.

Even when its very existence was threatened, Israel provided something that had not been available to Jews for over 2000 years: A haven. Hated, demonized, persecuted and the subject of constant and organized discrimination. This had been the reality for the Diaspora Jew. Even in the best of times, the Jewish people could never fully belong. (Twenty years before the rise of Nazism, Jews enjoyed full rights in German society, and could not imagine that their bosom friends and neighbours would happily kill them and their children with a minimum of provocation.) Israel changed all this. Jews were full citizens in Israel. All Jews. And though one's life may be claimed through war or a terror attack, in Israel there was never the uncertainty that if the economy hit a downturn or if the government changed, suddenly the Jews would be once again treated as a convenient scapegoat.

The State of Israel provides Jews from around the world with numerous tools for survival: A renewed sense of identity, a link between physically separated Jewish communities, a haven and an impediment to assimilation. How has Israel made a difference? Ask the Ethiopian-Israeli lawyer in Haifa, whose parents had never learned to read. Ask the third-generation Israeli child, chattering away in a language that 120 years ago was considered as dead as Ancient Greek or Latin. Ask the Israeli soldier, patrolling the borders in the Gaza Strip. He (or she) will likely answer with a burst of criticism about the Israeli Government and how the 'Palestinian situation' is being handled. Perhaps they are right to criticize, but could anyone watching the soldier –

brash and forthright, in peak physical condition and armed with a small arsenal of weapons – could anyone see that soldier being herded like a sheep to the gas chambers?

By its very existence, Israel has ensured the continuance of our culture and our faith, for generations to come. It must continue to exist, despite the constant threat it faces. The country is as threatened today as it was on the eve of its creation, just over 60 years ago, and we must not be complacent. We must support Israel by educating ourselves and our children about the country's short but eventful history, and about the heroism of the early settlers in the land. We must be unafraid to raise our voices in our country's defense, and not let media bias sway our faith in our country.

For Israel is truly our country. Our ancestors came from that land, and kept the dream of returning alive for generations. We must never forget that although modern Israel is still a young country, for the Jewish people Israel is not 60 but 3500 years old. In this essay I have explained how Israel at 60 made a difference. If you are curious how Israel at 3500 made a difference, well, just open up any history book and read about the many cultural groups that now exist only in antiquity. Israel at 60, 3500 or 5000 is a thread connecting the Jews of the world, a direct link to our history and a testament to our will to survive as a people.