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## VIII

# The Dream of Israel

If there is one place in the world where the state of Israel is regarded not as a territorial unit operating according to its own laws and within its own borders, but as a distant dream filling the veins of reality with sacred blood, that place is the Soviet Union. It is only the Jews of Russia who have yet to be infected with cynicism toward the Jewish state, who still identify the earthly Jerusalem with its heavenly counterpart, the eternal city that embraces a Temple of Fire.

Isolated behind walls of fear and silence, the Jews of Russia know nothing of the secular affairs of Israel, nothing of the scandals, of the petty political squabbles. They would not believe it anyway. For them the Jewish state is wrapped in a prayer shawl of purest blue. Its citizens are all righteous men and heroes; otherwise, they would not be living there.

It happened on Yom Kippur in the Great Synagogue of Moscow. Outside it was already dark.

The last prayer was almost over. Old men wept as the gates of heaven began to close; the Book of Judgment was being sealed—who shall live and who shall die, who shall be set free and who shall be afflicted. Their tears were a last effort to rend the skies and avert some terrible decree.

The hall was tense and crowded; the worshipers perspired heavily, suffocating from the heat and the effects of their day-long fast. No one complained. Outside, a large crowd was trying to push its way in. There was no room, but somehow they would manage. If there were places for two thousand, there would be places for three. An air of expectancy swept over the congregation.

Something was about to happen. They seemed nervous, serious, as if preparing for a dire and momentous act, a collective act that would be remembered forever.

The cantor finished the last prayer for forgiveness. He quickened his pace, as if rushing toward some critical event. Our Father our King, seal us in the Book of Life. Our Father our King, do it for the sake of the little children. Everyone seemed to be standing on tiptoe. Kaddish.<sup>\*</sup> Another minute. They counted the seconds. The cantor proclaimed, "Adonai hu haElohim, God is the Lord!" Seven times, with the congregation responding after him. The old sexton brought the shofar.<sup>\*\*</sup> T'kiah!<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The congregation held its breath. And then it happened. As if in response to a mysterious

\* Memorial prayer. T.N.

\*\* Ram's horn, blown during the High Holy Days as a call to repentance. T.N.

\*\*\* Designation for a prolonged blast on the shofar. T.N.

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command from an unknown source, three thousand Jews turned as one body toward the visitors' section, stood up straight and tall, facing the representatives of Israel, looking directly into their eyes, as if trying to read in them their past and their future, the secret of their existence. Then in the awful mounting silence they suddenly burst into a wild spontaneous cry which seemed to issue from a single throat, a single heart: "Next year in Jerusalem! Next year in Jerusalem! Next year in Jerusalem!"

The dramatic intensity of this moment immediately brought to my mind similar occurrences in the Middle Ages, when, with a single nod of the head, with a single declaration of faith, Jews sanctified the Name and died. No one had forced them; of their own free will they had repeated an ancient promise, "We shall do, and we shall listen." Instinctively, without preparation or prior instruction, they had slipped back hundreds of years. Their silence, like their cry, is to be understood not as a prayer, but as an oath of fidelity.

Some will say: double loyalties. But they will not understand that the loyalty of these Jews does not extend to a foreign power but to a concept and a vision, not to a foreign government but to longings which the act of fidelity itself both defines and symbolizes. For the Jews of Russia, Israel is not simply a geographical location but an abstract messianic principle, a part of their own inner spiritual life. It is perhaps strange that in the homeland of Marxist rationalism there are

still Jews who think of Israel as some kind of miracle and speak of it in terms that sound to us like the tritest and most pious of clichés. These Jews have not yet learned to enclose the word Zionism in quotation marks.

There is of course no lack of professional fault-finders. Just read the official press, which portrays Israel as an atavistic, racist, aggressive, and colonialist state, its leaders thorough scoundrels and its citizens exploited and defenseless captives—a kingdom of hell on earth. In one of the larger Russian cities, a government guide told me that a few years ago the Israeli Air Force had attempted to blow up the pyramids . . . in order to ruin the Egyptian tourist industry! He had heard this from "reliable sources." He also knew that in front of the Knesset building in Jerusalem there is a sign proclaiming that the state will not rest content until it has reconquered Mount Zion, which is situated, he averred, somewhere between Alexandria and Cairo. Similarly, he was prepared to swear on his life that Israel wants war, that it is allied with Nazi criminals in Germany, and that within its borders there is no such thing as individual liberty.

The purpose of such propaganda is to make Israel seem hateful not only to the general populace but to the Jews as well, to undermine the esteem in which they hold the Jewish state, and to convince them finally to relinquish an idea which has failed, a vision of redemption which has somehow been made profane. Jewish readers of Russian

• Parliament of Israel. T.N.



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newspapers are invited to see for themselves that what takes place in the Jewish state is a violation rather than a fulfillment of their ancestors' millennial dream. Ruled by reactionaries, it is a state which persecutes minorities, oppresses the weak, and exploits the poor. How much better then for Russian Jews to turn their backs and blot all memory of Israel from their minds and their hearts.

This form of psychological warfare, directed less against the Jewish state than against the Jewish dream, has thus far failed to achieve its objective. It will continue to fail in the future. The Russian authorities do not understand that the Jews and they are speaking two different languages, are talking about two different things. They fail to understand that it is possible to malign the earthly Jerusalem without injuring in the slightest the Jerusalem which Jews treasure in their dreams as a city innocent of any stain or flaw; their fidelity to that Jerusalem is in essence fidelity to themselves. It is for this reason that they value anything that comes from Israel and honor anyone who comes in its name.

Jews in New York, Paris, or London, even in Tel Aviv, are far more critical of Israel than are most Russian Jews. Somehow, we have all become used to judging Israel by routine secular standards; the hope of yesterday has become today's fact. We have learned to draw clear and distinct lines between dream and reality. But in Russia, Jews have yet to reach this stage of maturity. The simple day-to-day words which produce no reac-

tion in us whatsoever are often capable of reducing them to a state of extreme sentimental emotion. In Moscow I saw a Jew burst into tears when a little girl from Israel said something to him in Hebrew. I sometimes think that if Israel had been established solely for the sake of the Russian Jews, it would have fulfilled its purpose. If it existed solely to demonstrate to them that they must not despair, that a dream is indeed capable of becoming reality, that would have been sufficient.

On the other hand, it may be that our reality exists only, or at least partly, by virtue of their dream.

Were the gates suddenly to open, would all three million Jews in Russia decide to leave and go to Israel? I cannot answer that question. No one can. It is dangerous, and almost impossible, to generalize on this subject.

I did on occasion meet Jews who exclaimed to me, "If only they would load us all on a great cart and send us off to Israel!" But I also talked with young people who said the opposite, "We are not prepared to become immigrants in a new land and begin our lives all over again."

Once, some years ago, during the Stalin era, word came down that Jews would be permitted to register for exit visas. Thousands responded, and they were all imprisoned. Ever since, the Jews have feared a repetition of this incident. Even many of those who have close relatives in Israel, brothers and sisters, hesitate to apply for emigra-

tion permits. They prefer to wait . . . and to be silent.

So it is impossible to determine in advance precisely what would happen if and when the hoped for miracle should occur. There are those who believe we will witness a mass movement that will surpass in numbers and enthusiasm all previous emigrations to the land of Israel. Fifty years of communist rule, they argue, have proved to the Jews that no matter what they do, they will always remain an unwanted element in Russian society, denied the right to live as Jews and yet, as Jews, unable wholly to assimilate into non-Jewish society. Therefore, in the absence of any alternative, young and old alike will take the necessary final step and leave for a country that awaits them with open arms.

Others claim that only the aged will go and perhaps a small percentage of the young. Most young people will draw back at the last minute. They are not prepared to leave for all time the country in which they were born, brought up, and educated, whose language they love, and whose customs they know. The frequency of intermarriage among the young will prove to be another important deterrent. Despite the magical appeal of Israel and despite pressures at home, they will forego the opportunity to emigrate and will remain in Russia.

It is hard to determine which of these two readings is the more plausible. In deciding such questions, one could not rely on the findings of a public opinion poll or questionnaire, even if one dared



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to undertake such a survey. As in many other areas, we may speak with relative certainty only of subjective impressions.

During my travels I talked with older men, their children, and their grandchildren. I paid a number of visits to their homes and tried to sound them out. On the plane from Moscow to Leningrad I spoke with an electrical engineer; in Kiev I met a factory foreman; in Tbilisi I took a walk with a professor of political science; and in Moscow I spent many hours with students.

From everything they said and did not say, I came to the conclusion that many Russian Jews would seize an opportunity to flee the fear and discrimination which pursue them. To be more precise, the few would draw the many after them. Once it began, once permission was granted and the first gate opened, they would follow in multitudes. It has always been that way in Jewish history. Few have ever chosen to remain behind, alone.

But I should emphasize that if the Jews of Russia leave their homes it will not be because they oppose the regime or because the objective conditions of their lives are unbearable. Many Russian citizens share those same conditions. They will leave only because of the anti-Jewish atmosphere which—no matter who is at fault—permeates their homeland. Were they allowed to live full Jewish lives, were they not coerced into disowning their tradition, it is very likely that many of them would prefer to remain rather than set out for the unknown.



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But as a Jew in Kiev said to me, "If only this theoretical question became a real one, then we could do without answers."

There is no doubt, however, that Israel occupies a vital and central place in the consciousness of Russian Jews at all ages and all levels. Jews are interested in news from Israel not simply out of curiosity but out of a profound sense of shared purpose. They feel that what happens there also affects them, that their fate is linked with that of the Jewish state. And if they still dream of a messianic future, it is because there, across the sea, an attempt has already been made to establish a third Temple, a third Jewish Commonwealth. From afar, in thought and silent prayer, they strive to take part in that endeavor.

In virtually every Jewish home everyone listens to the broadcasts of the Voice of Israel. In every city I received the latest news from Israel at the synagogue. Members of the congregation would come up to me and whisper the content of Premier Levi Eshkol's latest speech in Tel Aviv, the words of Golda Meir at an assembly of the United Nations, or the most recent threats of Gamal Abdal Nasser. They importune tourists to tell them more and more about life in Israel. Somehow they still find it hard to believe that a Jewish state exists, with its own ministers and its own police force, its own army and its own heroes. They know it is all true, but it sounds like a dream. Again and again they ask you if the state is really all that strong, if its army is really capable of defeating

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the enemy, if its scientists are really internationally known, if its presence in Africa is really felt as much as that of the United States or the Soviet Union.

When you tell them what they want to hear, something takes fire in their eyes; they regard you as a messenger from a land of dreams, as the scion of a royal house. The waves of love I felt on the night of Simchat Torah in the Moscow synagogue were another expression of their reverence for the Jewish state and its significance for them. Their tears, their secret handshakes, their whispered messages and cautious touches, their short blessings, all indicated that I was a different kind of Jew from them, a kind they would like to become . . . unafraid, and free to express their feelings about the state of Israel. I shall never forget the Jew who came up to me in the synagogue and almost without moving his lips said under his breath, "I spent ten years in a prison and a labor camp for so-called Jewish nationalist activities; now I know that it was worth it." Or the sociology student who suddenly began to talk to me in broken Hebrew, in phrases that seemed to be taken out of a beginners' textbook, "This is a house. This is a man. This is a window. I am a Jew." That was all he said before he disappeared with a smile into the crowd.

And how can I forget the young people singing in Hebrew? The girls teaching their boyfriends Yiddish and Israeli songs which they had learned God knows how and God knows where; or the melancholy look of the waitress who saw the He-

brew newspaper in my hand? The hundreds of Jews who in a thousand different ways and through multifarious means always succeeded in identifying themselves to me, with a wink of the eye, a Hebrew word—how can I forget them?

"If something should happen to Israel, we would be totally lost. If that hope also explodes, we will no longer be able to hold out, we will have to submit." This was the opinion of a technician, about forty years old, who was born in Russia, studied in a Russian high school and university, served in the Red Army, and was wounded twice in the service of his homeland.

"If you could emigrate to Israel," I asked him, "would you go?"

He was a communist. "That is a question I'd rather not think about."

A paradox, perhaps. Can one be loyal to two opposing ideas at the same time? Apparently so. For the Jews of Russia everything is possible. It must be, or they would have given up long ago.

A communist student tried to argue with me one evening about relations between Israel and Germany. He had prepared all the right questions. "Why have they sold weapons and uniforms to the Bundeswehr? Why did they approve German rearmament? Why have they established diplomatic ties with Bonn?"

To be truthful, I did not feel very comfortable with these questions. I have my own opinions on this subject. But Moscow was not the proper place in which to begin criticizing Israel's German policy. Instead, I answered with another question.



"Is it all right for Moscow to do this? Is Moscow permitted to encourage trade relations with Bonn? Or to defend the legitimacy of East Germany? Why did Russia extend such a warm welcome to Alfred Krupp? And why are there more German tourists in Russia than any other kind?"

"That's different," he said finally, in some confusion. "Don't compare Israel to Russia."

He did not understand what he was saying. He did not realize that he, too, applied a different standard to Israel, that his relation to the Jewish state was qualitatively different even from his relation to Russia. He expected Israel to be pure and holy; Israel must not soil her hands.

An ancient proverb says: God bestowed two gifts upon men. To some he gave the gift of wine, and to some the faculty of thirst.

He gave the reality of Israel to us; the dream of Israel he left to the Jews of Russia. We are in need of them, just as they are in need of us. Perhaps more.

\* German industrialist whose factories produced arms for the Third Reich during World War II. T.N.