

## WHAT ISRAEL MEANS TO ME.

I see Israel as an aspect of more general "Jewishness" and shall try to draft their respective impact on my life.

I was brought up in the cosmopolitan context of the Warsaw intelligentsia, as the son of a German refugee. I vaguely knew my Jewish origin, but religion and nationality had little importance for us.

Amid this peaceful context, the encounter with Jewishness came like a thunder from the blue sky: Nazis occupied Poland and we were sent to the ghetto. The horror, in the face of brutal terror, turned soon into revolt. Having escaped from the ghetto I joined the Polish Resistance, the AK. Due to my proficiency in German I was assigned as liaison agent to the Gestapo penetration service, commanded by Captain Danuta. I applied also for missions of liaison with the ZOB (Jewish Fighting Organization) in the ghetto. In that role I joined The Uprising, which coincided with the Passion Week 1943. My memories in literary form ("Passion Week") are registered in Yad Vashem.

So much for my encounter with Jewishness. Israel, in the sense of "Eretz Yisrael", turned up for me after the war, through meeting other survivors, mostly adherents of HaShomer HaTzair, preparing to join kibbutzim and Zahal. We saw Israel as a safe harbor for Jews, as an ideal in which "Jew" had little to do with religion and meant mainly "the oppressed". Enthusiastic about the creation of Israel, we were deeply disappointed by its religious order, by its biblical justification, by the Law of Return founded in the halakhic definition of Jew. We dreamed about a secular country, sheltering of course religious Jews, but open to anybody sharing Jewish culture or fate. We saw the halakhic rule as an affront to our secular Weltanschauung and as outrageous injustice to "Goim" who trained with us in view of migrating for moral reasons to Israel, some being former AK liaison agents who had themselves fought in the Uprising.

Most of us were simple youngsters without much intellectual upbringing, but we saw the halakhic definition of "Jew" as an insult to common sense.

(Indeed, Halakha defines a Jew as the offspring of a Jewish mother. However, in order to ascertain that his mother was Jewish, he would have to prove that in turn, her mother, her grandmother, etc. were Jewish. A glaring vicious circle making motherhood-based Jewishness a logical nonsense. The marginal entry to the cycle, viz. the conversion, is no better: the converting rabbi must clearly be Jewish, but he cannot prove it either and may only spin in the same vicious circle.)

Thus, by the halakhic definition itself there ain't no sich animal as a "Jew". Halakhic "Jew" is an irrational, dogmatic phantasm. And yet, the fact remains that millions of Jews have been exterminated.

Phantasms versus Facts. I have fully grasped this dichotomy much later, working on foundations of Relativity with Einstein's team.

Einstein believed that a new reason is essential if mankind is to survive and that blunders cannot be remedied by the same reason that created them. Established reason, with its nationalist and religious phantasms and the jungle "freedom", ended up necessarily at Auschwitz. Thus, an Auschwitz-free, humane world may only be conceived in terms of a new reason banning irrational dogma and accepting only factually verifiable, rational ideas. On the face of it, religions, with their dogmatic, unverifiable phantasms, should be disregarded.

Yet, however irrational their dogma, religions are obviously social facts. Thus, an enlightened country should accommodate religions while refusing to be in any way ruled by their dogma and rigorously restricting laws to rationality. Individual beliefs, however delusory, should be respected as long as they don't infringe upon the law.

The Halutzim dream of Israel was clear: a shelter for the oppressed; rational, but tolerant towards irrational beliefs; peaceful, but unyielding to danger; pragmatic towards the "free" economy, but unselfish, incorruptible, and supportive of kibbutzim trying to break with the jungle.

Did this dream come true or, as some people say, has it turned into a nightmare?

I can only speak for myself.

My Alyah was delayed due to my critically ill father. I came just after the 6 days war, amid the enthusiasm of having conquered the Great Israel, the Golden Yerushalaim and the Snows of Hermon. My HaShomer HaTzair view saw it as a chance to share with Arabs modern agronomy, technology, democracy and welfare and to build together the most humane country, a model for the world.

I was of course aware of another view, that of orthodox rabbis, for whom the Great Israel was Yahve's present to Moses, in whose name they were ready to run it and to cash in the profits.

But I saw Israelis as predominantly secular workers and soldiers, while the devotees with their funny hats seemed to me derisory and impossible to be taken seriously.

The first anticlimax was sparked by the "street of injustice". I came across it visiting friends in a Haifa suburb. Its one side consisted of new residential houses flanked by posh Mercedes and Volvos. They were inhabited by Olim Hadashim (new arrivals) profiteering from immigration-boosting packages. Most of them in this street were thugs or gangsters escaped from the Soviets on false halakhic certificates signed by corrupted rabbis.

The other side of the street comprised decrepit shacks in which vegetated below poverty level old, pre-48 immigrants from Turkey or Iran. They had no right to any packages, only to fight in Haganah or in the IDF and, if invalids, to get \$10 monthly pensions. None could dream to ever have even the cheapest car. The shiny limousines from the opposite side were like a slap in the face.

Thus, my first disappointment concerned internal injustice flying in the face of my dream of a model country. Religious problems of various gravity followed shortly. Compulsory kashrut was a nuisance, even if a bearable one. The prohibition of public transportation on Shabbat was more annoying. Chains blocking roads in religious quarters were revolting: they barred emergency vehicles and caused serious accidents such as that of a soldier decapitated in his jeep. And sacrificing Israel's security for silly rituals seemed simply abhorrent: At the moment of writing these lines Israel faces existential risks and the government needing stability to deal with them may be overturned over the "problem" of selling bread during Passover!

Finally, the Yom Kippur trauma. The outrageous laxness, conceit and corruption of idolized leaders who nearly lost the war and annihilated Israel. And even worse: the apathy following our protest sparked by Motti Ashkenazi, the chronic apathy of Israelis. Olmert bungled the Lebanon war as Dayan the Yom Kippur and protests yielded alike to apathy, leaving the bungler at the helm in face of existential threats. Apathy which I never accepted and endeavor to overcome with our protest motto "Ichpat Li" - "I Do Care".

Yet, disappointments found compensations. Solidarity bridged, in my IDF unit, the secular-religious gap. The company counted several religious Yemenis, gentle, helpful and appreciated as best craftsmen one has ever seen. It visibly disturbed them to drive army vehicles on Shabbat, even if they did not refuse to do so. All secular soldiers proposed to swap their weekday duties against Yemenis' Shabbat ones, even when that could mean a lost Shabbat leave.

Yom Kippur trauma got abundant compensation, when the war, as good as lost by corrupted leaders, was unprecedentedly turned to victory by bottom-up initiative and determination. My participation in this "war of captains" was the most exalting experience of my life. It felt as if the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising had crushed Nazi Germany.

Yom Kippur has unfolded for me another aspect of Israel: its humanity. I got a leave for treatment of a hand wound in Haifa hospital. Like all civil hospitals at the time, it was overrun by wounded Arab POWs. Entering the hospital you were leaving your religion, nationality etc. outside, becoming just a patient. My case being benign, I slept on a mattress in the corridor among lightly-wounded Israelis, some of them high ranking officers. Comfortable rooms accommodated more serious cases, mostly the POWs. I can hardly imagine such a situation in any other country.

I believe this reasonably depicts "What Israel means to me":

A crucial determinant of my outlook on life.  
A dream that came true a bit shattered internally and externally besieged like the Ghetto.  
Thus a challenge and a ceaseless commitment.