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"Jubilee Historiography: Valor and Victimization"

by Kenneth W. Stein

Throughout this year of celebrating Israel's fiftieth and Zionism's centenary, reviews, lectures, and programs have commemorated these anniversaries. Noticeable are the variety and number of renditions which betray a passionate interest in Israel. And they emerge from Jews and non-Jews alike. Conspicuous is that Jews rather than non-Jews have been systematically harsher in their criticism of Zionism and Israel.

Most of the articles that I have seen or spoken to colleagues about were "Garden of Eden" histories; a preponderance of them concentrated on the story after the apple was bitten. Tones and content have blended the good stuff with the bad: compassion with criticism, guilt with greatness, and warts with worries. Politically correct "Spielbergian" realism was evident not deMille's emotional grandeur.

With the exception of major community-wide celebrations, the content of programs for Israel at 50, seem to have rarely lauded or extolled the country's history. Some have even scorned the struggle to create the Jewish state. Only a handful of written pieces portrayed glorifications that retold the gathering-in of the World War II remnants or rescuing Jews at Entebbe. Though Israel has had a stable of heroic leaders, not much was said about their contributions to shaping the state (Time magazine did list Ben-Gurion among this century's top 100 leaders). Some musical, literary, and media renditions commemorating the anniversaries were superb, giving us the tastes, smells, and sounds of Israel; others spanked Israel mercilessly.

My sense is that fifty years from now, when the article is written about Israel's Jubilee historiography, the headline will likely read "Profiles in Courage, Valor and Victimization."

Typical were newspaper stories that provided a sentence or paragraph or two about Israel's accomplishments, but then devoted majority space to negative characterizations about Israel's sour or surly mood and then enumerated the inevitable obligatory shopping list of social and political problems confronting Israel. Western-written as compared to Israeli-authored assessments focused on diaspora Jewish

and Israeli relations; few Israeli writers cared.

Israeli-written accounts tended to beat the breast harder, more frequently, and passionately about short-comings within Israeli society. Their emphases were on the deep social rifts, loss of a moral compass, and domestic resentments. Many writers dwelled on the lifeless and listless peace process. Some asked where have all the Israeli leaders gone? Most praised Israel's economic miracle. In recounting contemporary history, detractors and lovers of Israel alike overdosed on last night's politics, leaving out the rigorous step-by-step history of 100 years that evolved Zionism and then turned it into Israel. Israelis do not know or have forgotten all too quickly the step-by-step process of toil and sacrifice that created the state.

A segment of writers could not rejoice at all in Israel's 50th year. They used this occasion as an excuse to explore Israel's bad and the ugly done in five decades to Israel's Arab citizens, the non-Ashkenazi population, and to the Palestinian Arabs. These Jewish writers, western and Israeli alike, took very little pleasure in Israel's successes; instead they indicted Israeli history as imperfect, maintaining that it will remain so as long as those wronged or denied do not have their expectations met, whatever those expectations may be now or in the future. These were not merely writers of history; many crossed the transom and wrote historical editorials about the future they wanted Israel to be. Most forgot that Zionism was a minority enterprise, did not have its ideological roots in north Africa, or that it was not conjured up as a movement to satisfy Arab political aspirations.

Only a few essays dwelled explicitly on the virtues of dedication and industriousness that propelled Israel to this moment. The four articles in April edition of Commentary were notable exceptions. For the last several months, Israel's three major newspapers, Haaretz, Maariv, and Yediot Aharonot highlighted problems and shortcomings of today's Israeli society, again only occasionally mentioning Israel's pre-state history, or that from 1948 to 1967. In Israel, a twenty part television series, Tkuma (rebirth), did not merely retell the origins of Zionism and the upbuilding of the Jewish national home, it ventured into the accepted realm of criticizing Israel's leaders for poor treatment of the Israeli Arab, the sephardi Jews, and for abusing the Palestinians. Some of this may be true, but it is not all of Israeli history.

Among the non-Israeli material, the best balance and the best written was The Economist's special survey (4/25 - 5/1 issue), "After Zionism." Tikkun, with its unabashed left-liberal bias was expectedly most critical of Israel. Its March - April issue was subtitled, "Israel at Fifty: A Compassionately Critical Analysis." Surf the Web and you will find that

virtually every major American newspaper's Web site contained something associated with Israel at 50; for example see The Washington Post, New York Times, and CNN.

Israel has had its leaders and historical moments no less important than Washington, the American Revolution, Civil War, and civil rights movement. When America did its 200 anniversary celebration, chests were not beaten with as much zest for history gone awry as for the successes steadfastly accomplished.

So why so many mixed reviews? What does it mean that non-Jewish and non-Arab summaries of Israel at 50 and Zionism at 100 were much less harsh on Israel than ones written by Jews? Is it necessary to be Talmudic and have many historical analyses end with, "on the other hand?" Even with glowing imperfections inherent in Zionism and Israel, why is it difficult to be self-praiseworthy? Why have so many of these renditions emphasized the negative? Many Zionist and Israeli anniversary accounts contain a definite element of apology. When will writers about Israel, not dwell only on the "not so bad," but elaborate too on the "pretty good?"

Now is not a bad time.

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