

PART V

Israel/Palestine

Time in Israel, Parts I and II

November 1967

In the wake of his third trip to Israel in 1967 (after earlier visits in 1947 and 1964), Beerman penned some of his thoughts about the Six-Day War, which took place between June 5 and 10. In them, Beerman reflected on, among other subjects, the idea of a Jewish state, his connection to it, and his general view of nationalism. Below are two products of that reflection, not fully completed in either case, in which Beerman bares his soul about his Israel.

In the first, he reveals his typical capacity for grasping complexity in any given historical moment. He observes the fierce sense of pride and unity that the Six-Day War induced in Israelis—and, for that matter, in many Jews around the world. He also calls attention to the unrelenting hostility of the Arab world toward Israel and its existence. At the same time, he identifies himself here and later as a congenital skeptic, one who is good at identifying problems. Even in the midst of the post-Six-Day War euphoria experienced by many Jews, he asks probing and prescient questions: What is the nature of a Jewish state? Can it be fully democratic and equal for its Arab citizens? In this regard, he anticipates a pitched debate that broke out in Israel in the 1990s over whether the country should aspire to be a Jewish state, a state of the Jews, or a state of all of its citizens.

In the second set of reflections, Beerman enters into a more introspective state, meditating on his own connection to Israel. He declares himself to be a deep lover of Israel. He even demonstrates dexterity at rebutting claims from the Arab world that the State of Israel has no right to exist. But he also makes clear that he finds nationalism, including Zionism, to be chauvinistic and exclusionary. He resists the impulse to yoke or reduce the entirety of his Judaism to support for the Jewish state. And he gives voice here to his discomfort with the triumphalist sensibility that took hold in Israel

and the Diaspora after the Six-Day War. Along the way, Beerman recalls his encounters with Judah L. Magnes, under whose influence he came to Jerusalem in 1947, and with the Israeli author Aharon Megged, with whom in an Arab café in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967 he shared concerns over Israel's new militarism.

TIME IN ISRAEL, PART I

There are many Jewish travellers to Israel these days. They come for a host of old reasons but they come now specifically to see what Israel [has] wrought since those fateful days in May and June of this year.

It was once a tiny land, at best no larger than the state of Rhode Island. Now its dimensions along with its people's pride have been broadened. In the central region its belly is puffed out with the territory of the west bank of the Jordan. In the north its head is now bigger with the acquisition of the forbidding Golan Heights of Syria looking down upon the now tranquil Galilee. Its feet reaching westward to the Suez Canal planted firmly upon the desert of Sinai. It is now, for those who have known it intimately in these past twenty years, a huge land for so small a people. The mantle of authority over these newer borders is new and even tentative, at least in whispered conversation.

The traveler who comes [from] America, France, or England enters a strange atmosphere when he comes to Israel. At home in England, France, or America there rages conflict intellectual, political over any of a dozen issues. Last June, I met a French businessman in Beverly Hills and asked him how he felt about his government's policy in the Israel-Arab Conflict. His answer, very simple: It is not my government. It is de Gaulle. The English rage over the implications of the devaluation or the manner in which thousands of cattle are being destroyed to contend with hoof-and-mouth disease. Here at home the conscience of the nation is troubled and divided over a war in Vietnam that no one wants. There are many who love America dearly and who think it would be horrible for us if we were to win this terrible war. Coming from all these places where we are troubled about what our nations do and do not do, we are in Israel confronted with a ringing national unity. Its citizens still swell with the pride and vitality won with the swift victory of the six days of June. Its people is alive with enthusiasm which even though much paler than that of three or four months ago is still there to be experienced.

All those lingering fears and uncertainties about themselves were dispelled in those days. They were uncertain about the young, about the capacity of the young to meet the challenge of crisis. They were worried about what they called the disco-tech generation—that fear was dispelled when their young rose up in a manner even better, some said, than the old. They were even more troubled by the lurking suspicion that these newer immigrants to the land, those who had come since 1948 from Africa and Asia, those whose cultural traditions appeared to be so feeble, whose dignity so shabby, whose manners so primitive, whose emotions

so fragile, that these might crumble before the onslaught of the Arab armies and terrible noise of their weapons. But that did not happen, the *edot hamizrach*, the congregations of the East, the Afro Asian Jews who now constitute a majority of Israel's Jewish population demonstrated their courage and their resourcefulness. It is one of the victories of the war that they emerged with a new sense of dignity.

One encounters this fierce and often uncritical unity at least in so far as Israel's relationship with the world is concerned and an intense preoccupation with the nation itself, which is strange for us who lack this sense of identity with our country and its destiny. American Jews who visit quickly take on this intense preoccupation with self and revel in it; it brings a sense of order, purpose, [and] meaning . . .¹

I am by nature not the best kind of a person to visit any country. I am a problem-oriented person. My wife is not. She considers herself a citizen of Jerusalem and is probably convinced that whatever is good for the Jews of Jerusalem is good for her, come war, come napalm, come what may. I, on the other hand, am interested in the more abstract problems of justice and even of human destiny. I measure my own achievements against what I consider to be high and lofty goals, which I haven't reached. I measure nations in much the same way; what they are must be evaluated in terms of what they can become. As a consequence I am not at home anywhere in the world because I am not satisfied with anything the world is presently making available to me.

Israelis are very realistic and pragmatic people. They want to live in security and peace. It is as simple as that. They fought a war to insure that security. They will hold on to the territories they now occupy until they can be assured of an agreement that will confirm their right to exist in peace and security. The Arab states continue now their belligerency. They continue to spew forth their venom. They continue to look upon Israel as the violator of Arab soil. Now that Israel has proved her vitality, her refusal to give up the ghost, the Arabs instead of reexamining their premises only rage the more. Israel knows this and it is using the implements of force and diplomacy and simple stubbornness to meet the situation.

My primary concern in visiting the country was to learn what I could about [the] future nature of the relationship between Israel and the Arabs within and without the country. I was concerned with Israel's existence but also with a number of gnawing problems that touched, it seemed to me, upon [some of] the fundamental moral nature of the nation's existence. My colleague Rabbi Jack Cohen, the Hillel director in the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, had raised some of the questions. They are disturbing questions and they are perhaps not of much interest to many people: Should a state any longer be erected along lines [of] ethnic, religious, or racial preference? How can we speak of the quality of citizens where one group has more equality than others? How can we say that Israel is a Jewish state but that Arabs have full equality as citizens? What does it mean for an Arab to be equal in a state that is called Jewish? In what sense should Israel be a Jewish state? How far should the power of the majority rule? When symbols of the Jewish state

are taken from Jewish religious and national sources, what is an Arab supposed to feel? Once peace is established, won't Israel find itself a small unit in the midst of a large essential[ly] Islamic Arab civilization?

First, it seems the Arabs have to be convinced that the state of Israel has the power to survive. Second that Jews have come home to an area occupied in their absence by another people who have earned the right to live there. Recognizing those rights and establishing humane relations with Arabs must be a primary moral concern for Jews. How to enable the Arabs to feel a part of Israel and participants in its emerging culture is the major challenge.

I said [some] Jews [are] not interested in this problem. 1. Some are not concerned about Arab comfortability. Arabs do not exist. They are relaxed in [their] own majority status; they have lost empathy with [a] minority. 2. Make it uncomfortable, so they will leave. 3. Israel must discriminate in favor of Jews, to care for needs of Jewish people. The real issue is whether Israel sees its future in this region and with these peoples in solidarity with their fate.

TIME IN ISRAEL, PART II

I wonder sometimes what all of those people in this congregation and others who feel that religion and politics shouldn't mix feel about the discussions of Israel which have taken place since the closing weeks of last May. Surely strife between nations is political. As such the concerns of Israel and her Arab neighbors would for those who contend that the political and the religious are separate realms have no place whatsoever in a synagogue. The absurdity of defining Judaism so narrowly and parochially becomes apparent to all of us when we consider the academic question of Israel. The conflict should render once and for all the problem [of] whether we are merely a religion. Strife between nations is a political question; but political questions have a relevance for religious faith and for its values.

It is no secret to you that over the years I have not been among the rabbis who have devoted a major portion of my concerns to Israel. It was not that I (. . .).² I was bothered by what I felt were the uncritical celebrations of Israel at every public meeting. I was offended by the politicians who used Israel to curry Jewish favor. Moreover, I felt there was something basically unwholesome in deriving one's sense of inner worth as a Jew from accomplishments made by someone else. We had become significant as Jews because of the courage of the Israelis—this theme was exploited in many Jewish communal endeavors and in much fiction—not the least of which was the novel *Exodus*. It was not that I loved Israel less, I do not believe, but rather in a different way. We were members of the same family, American Jews and Israelis; we had an obligation to one another that being a part of a *mishpacha*³ should produce. We shared a common history, a common agony and glory, and a common destiny as Jews. But we each had a right to our own integrity. I am proud of my brothers' achievement, but this achievement alone

does not make me significant or great. What I am as a Jew must be drawn from the resources within me. We are related; we rejoice in each other's accomplishment; we are disappointed in each other's failure; but neither of us can survive on a borrowed glory.

It need not be said my interest and concern for Israel have deep roots. They are born of my more than bowing acquaintance with Jewish history and of the love for the land of Israel that comes inevitably to those of us who have achieved some intimacy with our heritage. They grew as a result of visits to Israel. Our first trip was in 1947 when Martha and I and the world were much younger, and we lived there for six or seven months at the time when the new state was coming into being. And then again three years ago, another six months of living in Jerusalem. And now a recent and hasty encounter again. I have come to know that Israel is a remarkable achievement, but not a Utopia. It is a human state, subject to the same standards of moral judgment which must be brought upon all states. Moreover, I confess I have no particular reverence for nations, Jewish or otherwise. It is people, living, breathing, dreaming, and even lusting people I care about. I care about the Jewish people in a very private and special way, because they are my people; we are part of the same branch of the human family. The political entity of the state of Israel has not been particularly moving to me simply because it is the creation of Jews. I have accepted it as political necessity, as a means of guaranteeing the right of Jews to live peacefully and productively in the land together with the prior inhabitants of the land, the Arab people. Had it been possible to secure the right to live peacefully and productively to develop Jewish cultural life and to redeem the land without a Jewish political entity called a state, I should not have been troubled at all. I was one of that tiny group that in 1947 supported the idea of a bi-national state along with men whom I then and still now revere, Judah Magnes and Martin Buber. They were very unpopular men when they proposed that solution to the Palestine problem, as it used to be called. They were almost totally rejected by the overwhelming sentiment of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. Bi-nationalism as a solution had a certain moral dignity but like so many of my ideas it lacked any political realism. The people of the Yishuv, the Jewish settlement of Palestine, the nations of the world, the Zionist movement had decided on the establishment of a Jewish state. And so it came to be.

I feel today a deep love for Israel, even a deep yearning for Israel, and yet I do not share the intense national feelings which others have for it. I am a person without any feelings of national identity, American or otherwise. Perhaps that is why I have never called myself a Zionist, and I have some hesitation in being an American.

I said I loved Israel. I should probably be happier living there at this juncture in history than anywhere else I have come to know. But love is not blind. To love does not mean or should not mean that we pretend away the imperfections we find in the one we love. Such has always been my love for Israel. A love mixed with a wholesome ability to be critical.

Our first day in Jerusalem a few weeks ago we walked to the Old City, which we had not seen for twenty years when the city first became a divided one. It was mid-November and clouds came up suddenly out of the west, and as we explored the winding, twisting narrow streets of old Jerusalem behind the walls rain began to fall. It wasn't just rain, it was an enormous cloudburst and before we knew [it] a flood was sweeping powerfully through those narrow streets. We retreated into an Arab cafe. Another couple was there before us. It turned out to be one of Israel's outstanding literary figures, Aharon Megged, a novelist, playwright, and editor. Somehow the conversation turned to the question of my reaction to what had happened since the Six-Day War. I said that I consider war to be always a tragedy. That I derived no sense of pride from military accomplishment. I wanted desperately for Israel to survive but I was perturbed at the spirit of triumphalism. The Jew as military hero or as expert in the use of air power, tanks, and napalm was very difficult for me to accept. I don't know what prompted me to be so free with my feelings, but I was taken aback when Megged said: That is exactly what I have just written about in [an] article, which is published in America this very month. I returned to find Megged's piece on my desk; it was entitled "Israel's new image." The new image he says is that of a heroic people, mighty in war, pursuing its enemies, destroying its foes with lightning speed. One more day and we would have stood at Cairo. Or those endless obscene jokes. We were no longer the boy David facing the giant Goliath. It is a liberating image, which did away with the need to feel compassion and guilt or pity. The old Jewish sentimentality with its moral complexities was disdained.

But Megged says that new image will not endure because the Jewish national character has been shaped in another way through its history. Certain character traits were formed in our history that were to serve as models and ideals for Jewish culture. Abraham the lover of peace and justice who pleaded against the destruction of Sodom, Isaac the shepherd and digger of wells, Jacob the dweller in tents—these myths were formed when Israel dwelled in the land of Canaan. This was our self-image and it differed radically from the tales of heroism and passion, which were incorporated in the images of Gilgamesh and Odysseus, and Siegfried, the men of arms who shaped the historical course of other cultures. It was Moses, not Joshua, whom we revered. It was David the boy and the man not as conqueror, it was Solomon the wise king and not Solomon the glorious potentate; it was the prophets, not the Kings. Even in Israel itself [among] the generations who grew up there without knowing the Diaspora existence this image was perpetuated. The literature [of] Israel has by and large identified with the fate of the vanquished, the refugee, the prisoner, the displaced. There was no place for hatred and revenge.

Megged goes on to say that the land of Israel is indivisible not as a consequence of military conquest but because such it has always been in the Jewish consciousness.

The land of Israel's indivisible geographic and spiritual wholeness are enhanced by one another. This is what it has always been, he insists, in the national consciousness of Jews. That is why Jews are in Israel today, because of that national consciousness attached inexorably to the land—there is a historical and mythical bond with the land and its skies. That is what I feel when I am there too.

The difficulty has always been that the land also belongs to the Arabs who have lived there for generations; it is also a part of their individual and national consciousness. And they are entitled to be themselves. They cannot be displaced or oppressed. They must be dealt with as equals, not in the language of orders and decrees, but in the manner of a dialogue between two nations whom history and fate have destined to inhabit one country.

How shall that come to pass? That is the central conflict which confronts the future of Israel. Where spirit and geography are joined nationalism is born. National aspirations are by necessity mutually exclusive. Must they be mutually aggressive?

The Arabs have steadfastly refused to recognize either the viability or the authenticity of Israel's right to exist as a nation. The record of their aggression is well known to all of us. It is good to know what the Arab case is, since by reason of it Israel's existence has been threatened for twenty years. There are three arguments employed by the Arabs: 1. The artificiality of the Jewish state; 2. That it burdens the Arabs with the consequences of Hitler's persecution of the Jews; and 3. That Israel is the bridgehead of imperialism in the Middle East, a European enclave serving to suppress Arab nationalism.

The Six-Day War should have brought home with thundering truth the reality of the state of Israel. The reality of states is not proved by intellectual discussion, but by the way they stand up to the test of extreme necessity. The response of Israel's people to the recent war should have proven once and for all that Israel is not [an] artificial creation, a conglomeration of refugees. There were some Israelis who had serious doubts about this too, suspicious of the *edot hamizrach*, of the discotheque generation of the young. Their united response to impending catastrophe put the lie to all of these suspicions.

As for burdening the Arabs with the consequences of Hitler's persecution of the Jews. Jews have not been a problem. The influx of Jewish immigration is not only the result of what happened to Jews in Europe but also what has happened to them in Arab lands. Fully half of Israel's population came as refugees from Arab countries. But the basic question behind this argument is whether Palestine is an Arab or Jewish country. This is a point of collision between conflicting national myths. Where national myths collide history provides examples [of] how such collisions are solved. The first by exterminating the opponent. This the Turks did with the Armenians. Or a second method would [be] through a recurrent probing with force, the hereditary enemy—the Germans and French, the Poles and Russians—there was bloodletting for centuries but eventually there were no

significant changes of frontiers. Third is through an accommodation between conflicting dreams—finding a way to live together. Such accommodations have historically come about after long struggles—the nations of the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, the English and the Scots, the Swiss.

The rise of super powers in our world today has really transformed the meaning of national independence. The very possibility of war today is dependent on the readiness of the super powers to provide conflicting forces with weapons. Arabs and Jews in trying to assert themselves by confrontation become increasingly dependent for their very existence upon the great powers. Against their will they become instruments in the struggle between these powers.

Arabs claim that Israel is a bridgehead of imperialism, Western imperialism. There is some truth in that statement. Israel has introduced Western technology, Western ways of living. There is probably nothing in Israel quite as Western as an oil corporation the presence of which has not disturbed most of the Arab leadership.

COMMENTARY BY DANIEL SOKATCH

In November of 1967, just months after the Six-Day War, Rabbi Leonard Beerman returned home from a trip to Israel to preach about what he had seen there. Today, his words and his worries seem almost prophetic. One wonders how they were received forty-nine years ago, as the aftershocks of the war transformed Israel's sense of itself, and the American Jewish community's sense of Israel. It must have been jarring for Leonard's congregants to hear him, so soon after near catastrophe and then the cathartic triumph of the war, not only question the "spirit of triumphalism" that so disturbed him but also begin to dig down into the deeper questions of what the war might mean for the future moral fiber of Israel and the Jewish people.

Beerman always stood apart when it came to Israel. He loved Israel, even yearned for it, but declared, "To love does not mean . . . that we pretend away the imperfections we find in the one we love." He was deeply distrustful of any nationalism, and reluctant to identify as a Zionist. In 1947, he supported the "moral dignity" of the bi-nationalism of Martin Buber and Judah Magnes, even as he later acknowledged it as politically unrealistic. And in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War he was one of the few American Jewish leaders who agonized over what control over millions of Arabs—whose right and connection to the land he understood to be just as valid as those of the Jewish people—would mean for Israel's democracy, future, and soul. It was characteristic of Leonard that, decades later, he took no pleasure in being proved right.