

The good news about Israel is that the situation there is much better. The bad news is “better than what?” Two years ago when I visited Israel, the mood was incredibly bleak. There were bombings almost every day. One morning I was awakened at 4:30 in the morning to the sounds of screeching jet aircraft and bombs exploding in Bethlehem, four miles from where I was staying. The night I left Israel in March 2002 one of Jerusalem’s most popular cafes - the Moment Café - had a suicide bomber, leaving 11 people dead and 54 injured, 10 of them seriously. Within a few weeks, the Israeli army, responding to both the number and audacity of attacks returned to areas Palestinians had controlled for a few years, returned to them under the provisions of the Oslo Accord. In short order, the Sharon government embarked on the building of a security fence and wall, terrorist leaders were targeted for assassination and restrictions were placed on Palestinians. Two years ago was truly one of Israel’s “worst of times.”

How incredibly different was the situation a little over a month ago when I went on a six day mission with the rabbinic council of ARZA - the Association of Reform Zionists of America. While I would not be prepared to say Israel is now in the “best of times”, the situation is remarkably different and the mood so much more hopeful. This evening I want to reflect on first, the reason for my optimism; second, why I qualify it as a cautious optimism and finally, to suggest ways that you and I can support Israel at this time.

If you have not been to Israel for more than a decade, in many ways it would not be physically recognizable. Israel is clearly a first world country - and it is evident in its economic stability, its well-developed transportation system, its vibrant free press and its open political system.

The changes that have taken place are evident from the moment one lands. In earlier days weary travelers arriving by plane had to walk down the steps to be taken to a bus that would drive one to the terminal. The newly opened Ben Gurion Airport is massive, modern ... and, one Israeli I met joked, “is just a bunch of gates connected to a shopping mall.” The airport, like Route 6, the Trans-Israel highway that speeds people from north to south and cuts the drive time from Jerusalem to Haifa by half, was built even over the past five years of struggle. Tel Aviv - which once had only one skyscraper over 40 stories - is now a gleaming 21st century metropolis, with a couple of dozen major skyscrapers and construction cranes reappearing. Double-decker trains whiz between Haifa and Tel Aviv, and tracks are being laid for a Jerusalem-Tel Aviv line that would take one from one city to the next in 45 minutes. Even Jerusalem has grown dramatically, spilling over into the Judean hills, and is embarked on a major light-rail project. All these are stark reminders of an Israel that has not only resisted the violence, but flourished in spite of it.

The increasingly confident mood, however, is not simply from what has been built. Our mission came at an auspicious time. We arrived in Israel a week before the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting involving Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinians. The prospect of a cease-fire offered the hope that perhaps the first halting steps toward a peace had begun. Unsure, tentative steps that started to be seen soon after Yasir Arafat died, began to bear fruit in tangible changes - at least at the official level. In fact, when we were there, so much better was the situation from a few months earlier that some Israelis wryly observed that Arafat should be nominated for a second Nobel Peace prize ... for dying!

The reason for optimism came not only from the progress being made on the political scene. Indeed, much of our time was devoted to visiting many of the centers of Reform Jewish life in Israel. Despite the fact that our Progressive/Reform colleagues and their congregations receive no governmental support, there has been tremendous progress in making liberal Judaism an important part of Israeli life. The Movement's kindergartens are bursting at the seams. Ground has been broken for a Yaffo branch of Tel Aviv's Beit Daniel Synagogue. Or Chadash Synagogue in Haifa and its Rabbi, Edgar Nof, are doing extraordinary outreach work in the community, welcoming new Israelis and supporting Arab-Jewish coexistence in Israel's most integrated city. The Leo Baeck High School in that city is seen as the model for progressive, liberal education, while the Lokey Academy for International Studies on the Leo Baeck campus is bringing high school students from around the world to Israel for an innovative educational program. There are currently more than 20 Israeli-born rabbinical students at the HUC-JIR campus in Jerusalem, an encouraging sign that the Movement is becoming a native Israeli Movement. There are 100 American Reform high school students participating in the Eisendrath Educational Exchange (EIE) program. The Carmiel program, which brings American high school graduates to Israel for a year of study before they begin college, has just begun and is already proving to be a great success.

On the Erev Shabbat I was in Israel I attended services in Israel's newest city - Modi'in - at Kehillat Yozma, where the spirit in services is lively and anyone familiar with worship at The Community Synagogue would feel right at home. Under the leadership of Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon, Yozma is booming, but the congregation is unable to secure enough funds to build a building. The challenge for the community is that unlike Orthodox synagogues, which receive money from the Israeli government, Reform communities must fend for themselves. With the financial situation of people so stretched, Yozma can rely only on the beneficence of overseas donors to secure their building. Services and classes are held in caravans, portables similar to those used by schools for their overflow classes - clearly inadequate for their needs.

No longer small, Reform has struck roots in the Jewish State. There remain, however, great challenges.

Reform Jews in Israel, of course, face the same concerns all Israelis do with regard to the issues of security and peace. While there was much to feel hopeful about, even when I was there I shared with many Israelis and rabbinic colleagues a sense of unease and uncertainty, of a cautious optimism, at best. Though things are markedly better, we all know how quickly that could turn. David Horovitz, Editor-in-Chief of the *Jerusalem Post*, spoke to our group and said that “if anyone tells you they know what will happen in the Middle East, don’t believe them.” His insight is an invaluable one to bear in mind. There are so many variables. What will Syria do in Lebanon? Will increased U.S. pressure on Iran lead to Hizzbollah, the terrorist group Iran supports, to step up attacks on Israel’s northern border? Can Egypt maintain real security and curtail arms smuggling in to Gaza? Will the disengagement from Gaza that Prime Minister Sharon has said will happen actually take place? Will the men in charge stay in charge (given, for example, the threats on Sharon’s life, which Israeli intelligence takes so seriously that the Prime Minister walks surrounded by a dozen body guards)?

The uncertainties make me, at the very least, wary. On the morning the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting was announced, the 25 rabbis on the trip met with U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Daniel Kurtzer. Speaking with me privately, he asked how I felt about the news of the announced four-way summit meeting. “I want to be optimistic,” I said, “but I had such high hopes - maybe unrealistic hopes - in Oslo. So much has happened. And while I think Abu Mazen does seem to want an end to the violence, I just don’t know if the Palestinian people have really abandoned it as a means to achieve their ends. And what about the extremists within Israel, who see any withdrawal from land as a traitorous act? They want Prime Minister Sharon dead.” I concluded on a gloomy note, “I will be back in Israel (God willing) this December with a group from my congregation. I just hope that both Abu Mazen and Arik Sharon are alive; and my biggest fear is that if peace does look real both will be targeted for assassination ... and by their own people.”

The nation is, as you may well know, deeply divided about the impending Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. Politicians and the people on the street hold radically divergent views concerning this momentous undertaking. Some suggest that should the disengagement actually take place there will be pitched battles between settlers and soldiers. Others are opposed to the withdrawal because Israel seemingly gets nothing in return. And, still others believe that getting out of Gaza is absolutely right and necessary, not only in support of Palestinians, but because it will provide greater security for Israel as a whole.

We were reminded of how complex an issue the withdrawal is when we traveled to the settlement town of Sederot, which is located just a few miles from the border with Gaza. We visited the Abukasis family, whose 17-year old daughter Ella was killed just a few weeks before. Walking home from school with her brother, Tamir, Ella heard someone yell “incoming fire” and she instinctively threw herself on her brother. Ella - a compassionate young woman who volunteered in a number of community organizations - died later of her wounds. Her 11-year old brother, however, was saved by her heroic act. When I asked what message Mr. Abukasis had for us - and for our communities back here - he spoke with quiet strength. “Do not be afraid ... and do not reward terror.” It is a reminder that even as Israel and the Palestinian leadership make steps towards a lessening of tensions, there are many who refuse to accept any ceasefire and whose actions could, at any moment, derail progress.

For now, however, the mood is not only good, but improving. What can we do here to help? Three suggestions:

- One, stay informed. Read the *Jerusalem Report* or *The Jerusalem Post*, which provide balanced coverage representing a wide-range of views. More critical views of the Arab press can be found on the important websites of MEMRI (the Middle East Media Research Institute) and Palestinian Media Watch. Both of these look at what Arabs in general and Palestinians, in particular, are saying to their people on radio, television and in the papers. A look at their sites will be a sobering reminder of how much has yet to change if any semblance of peace can truly come.
- Two, visit. It would be wonderful to have you join our congregation’s “Hanukkah in Israel” trip this December, but even if you cannot go then, find another way to get there. Security is no more of an issue there than it is traveling into Manhattan. And when you travel there you see the dreams of Judaism coming alive. With so many people on the streets, in restaurants and cafes, Israelis feel life returning. The only thing they are surprised about is that more tourists are not coming already. A sign of the changing circumstances is that Jewish groups coming from abroad are no longer called “solidarity missions”, but just tour groups.
- Three, give wisely, but generously, to Israeli groups you think are deserving. Though the Israeli economy showed very positive growth last year, and tourism is up substantially, the past five years have taken a heavy economic toll. Israeli families are stretched as many jobs were lost or hours were cut back. The Israeli government has been forced to spend more for security, leaving less for social needs. The demand is great - and our *tzedakah* (our righteous giving) can make a difference. There are

many ways to help, but one great way will be to join our Mitzvah Corps in a “Walk-a-thon” on Sunday, April 10 for Magen David Adom, the “Red Star of David”, where we hope to raise enough to purchase an ambulance.

In short, you can do something ... and whatever that is does make a difference.

What, then, lies ahead? I am, by nature, neither an optimist nor a pessimist, but a bit of a contrarian. When most people say the “glass is half full”, I tend to focus on the problems and obstacles that make a positive outcome less likely. Amongst those who see things in negative terms, however, I see how much good there is in people and how, even against the odds, positive change can happen. When it comes to Israel my uncertainties and hopes, fears and expectations remain locked, then, in a tight embrace.

While it is easy to become discouraged, to see how difficult is the road ahead, there are moments when the miracle of Israel - and the possibility of future progress - becomes clearer. One such moment took place near the end of the tour our rabbinic mission had in the Knesset. After meeting four Members of Knesset, representing widely divergent points of view, we were prevented from leaving and told to wait at the bottom of a staircase. At the top were two rows of police officers, wearing their formal uniforms. A few minutes passed and, suddenly, everyone stood at attention. Through the phalanx of police walked the German President Horst Koehler, on the first such visit by the President of Germany to the State of Israel. It was almost to the day 60 years before, when Allied troops liberated Auschwitz, and looked into the face of the hell created by the Nazis. On this day, however, the head of Germany strode into the Knesset, the representative body of the Jewish State, side by side with the Prime Minister and President of Israel, flanked by Jewish policeman.

President Koehler began his remarks in Hebrew, then continued in German. In his address, he told the Israeli parliament that responsibility for the Holocaust was an integral part of his country’s national identity, and cautioned that the battle against anti-Semitism had not been won. He also noted Germany’s support of Israel and its right to exist and defend itself against Arab aggressors. He concluded, “Germany stands unswervingly side by side with Israel and its people.”

If someone had said in the days after the liberation of the death camps, that Jewish police would guard the head of Germany in a Jewish land, and that he would affirm German affiliation with the Jews in Hebrew (no less!), we would have laughed at the possibility. If such things have happened, let us not lose hope that similar progress can be made between Palestinians and Israel.

Against all reason, Jews maintained the dream that they could return to the land. Against all odds, Israel came to be. Against all probability, Israel flourishes as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy: "I will bring back from captivity My people Israel and Judah, says the Eternal, And I will cause them to return to the land that I gave to their ancestors, and they shall possess it." (Jeremiah 30: 3). Israel is a nation of hope kept and hope renewed. Now, as always in that land, it is a time of hope.