

ISRAEL
Yom Kippur Day
Saturday morning, September 14, 2013

Last March, I spend 10 delightful days in Israel with a group, which traveled under the auspices of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Since my return, I have been trying to figure out why the trip was so good.

Yes, it is true that most of the group, made up of all Christians, were friends of mine. That made for many pleasant evenings in restaurants, which have become increasingly good.

Yes, it is true that the group was widely traveled, but not to Israel.

Yes, the weather was perfect. The days were mild and the evenings were cool.

But I suspect that there were many other factors contributing to the good feelings, which I still retain.

I. RENEWED FEELING OF SELF CONFIDENCE

In spite of all of its security problems, I sensed a new feeling of self-confidence in Israel.

I immediately asked myself whether this was about me, or was it really about Israel. Then, I began to try and analyze just what I was feeling.

First, Israel discovered a huge source of natural gas right off its shores. This discovery will ultimately free Israel from dependence on oil, which is imported from countries all over the world. Very frequently, this comes at huge expense, because Israel does not have warm relations with most of the OPEC countries. So, purchases must be made through third parties, who sell to Israel with a great margin for profit. Energy independence is not only in Israel's future, but income from natural gas sales will boost Israel's economy enormously.

Second, the technological progress made in Israel is extraordinary. There have been at least two books written in the last several years about Israeli innovation. Through the teaching style at the Technion, Israel's MIT, students are encouraged to experiment with new ideas and new techniques.

But additionally, army service has served as a stimulant for new ideas. Apparently, the military service, which everyone must undergo, encourages innovation rather than mere following orders. What would seem like insubordination elsewhere, is encouraged and rewarded.

Lastly, Israel is still the second largest supplier of computer software in the world, after the United States. One of the world's largest software manufacturers Intel, has a huge plant in Israel, as do other Israeli and international manufacturers.

I suspect that my good feelings come, at least in part, from Israel's forefront position in the new frontier facing the world in the 21st century.

II. THE REASSERTION OF SECULARISM

For many years, the political spectrum in Israel has depended on the support of the radical Orthodox parties.

A word of background will help us understand this curious phenomenon. From the beginning of the Jewish State, the major political party was the Labor Party. This was the party of David Ben Gurion, of Golda Meir, and of most of the political leaders whom you can name.

Their conception of Israel was that it was to be a secular Jewish democratic state in the Middle East. It was to emphasize the widely accepted democratic values of the United States and Western Europe. While radical Orthodox Judaism was to be permitted certain rights, the entire tone of the country was to be secular.

Let me interject a note here. Non-Jews have a difficult time in grasping the idea of *secular* Judaism. Isn't Judaism a religion, they ask. Of course the answer is "Yes, but..."

In 1977, Menachem Begin formed a new coalition, which brought in the radical Orthodox parties. This ultimately resulted in a new assertion of power by religious ideologues, who asserted the irredentist notion of a greater Israel. They cavalierly used biblical verses to support their ideas, which were imposed on a stunned Israel.

But everything changed in the most recent election for the Knesset. There emerged a new political party Yesh Atid," there is a future." Its leader Yair Lapid is a former television

journalist, who firmly identifies himself as a secularist. His new party was able to garner 19 seats in the Parliament.

So, instead of the radical Orthodox parties controlling the coalition, it was the secularists. And the main issue for them was the Tal Law, which gave automatic military deferments to anyone studying in a Yeshiva.

That is just fine. We Jews believe in study and scholarship.

In 1974, only 2.4% per cent of those eligible for the draft were exempted because of Torah study, in 2104, the number is estimated at 22 %. Without dwelling on percentages, it is clear that most Israelis felt that radical Orthodox Jews should also bear their responsibility for the security of the State of Israel.

The undergirding of the secular reassertion is the clear abrogation of national responsibility that the Tal Law represented. The extremes of radical Orthodoxy have now been halted, and a more sane method of supporting Torah study at the same time as defending the State are being developed. The matter is not finished yet.

The political spectrum of Israel is now moving closer to mirroring the population of Israel. A small band of radical Orthodox Jews will no longer impose their antiquated will on the population of Israel.

III. THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Closely related to the issue of emerging secularism is the role of women in Israel.

We Americans have always applauded the fact that Golda Meir was elected prime minister of Israel in 1969. Golda was tough and grandmotherly at the same time. She was a very astute politician, who earned the respect of all Israelis and of men and women throughout the world.

Of course, there has not been another Golda Meir. Yet.

But we are seeing some very interesting signs of women power in Israel. I refer here to the movement called "Women at the Wall." "Women at the Wall" began with a group of Reform and Conservative women rabbis and lay leaders who wished to pray at the Western Wall of the Temple with talitot, and some with tefillin, in violation of radical Orthodox tradition.

Let me stop here to say a word about the Western Wall of the Temple. There are many Orthodox Jews who yearn for the re-establishment of Temple worship as described in the Bible. There is even a group of these radical Orthodox who have made all of the vessels described in the Bible, and who pray regularly for the restoration of the Temple sacrificial cult.

When the Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, all Temple worship ceased. For most Jews, the passages in the Bible about Temple worship are a historical reminder, not a prescription of what should be.

In fact, modern Judaism has moved away from the notion of holy sites. Christianity has not. For the radical Orthodox, worship at the tombs of ancient rabbis in Israel is commonplace.

Worship at the Temple wall strikes modern Jews as nothing short of idolatry. In Hebrew, *avodah zara*.

So for me, the so-called “holiness” of the western wall of the Temple is antithetical to modern Judaism, whether it be Reform, Conservative or Orthodox.

So, the choice for women’s rebellion at the stranglehold that Haredi Jews have over the Wall is strange, to say the least.

Be that as it may, the “Women at the Wall” movement has clearly articulated the idea that radical Jews cannot and will not control the practice of Judaism, either in Israel or any place else in the world.

For some Jewish theologians, the theology of Haredi Judaism is filled with idol worship, especially in their assertions that Menahem Schneerson is the messiah. Some even declare that these radicals are no longer Jewish.

The “Women at the Wall” should have the support of all Jews, even though their focus is something that I do not believe is ideal.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps the name of Yair Lapid's political party YESH ATID is what gives me such a feeling of optimism. The name of the party means "There is a Future." Israel is no longer stuck, as it had been for many years, in old ideas and patterns. There seemed to be no way to move beyond the old formulas, which no longer work, or the old ideas, which are just that "old."

Now, technology and secularism combined with women power bode well for the future of Israel. We are not there yet. There is much to be done; the agenda is very, very long. But I, and many others have the feeling that we have turned the corner.

Perhaps the prophetic words of Jeremiah "Yesh Atid v'Tikvah"- there is a future and a hope - will be the theme of the Jewish future in the Land of Israel.