

My Israel

In June, 1957, I made my first visit to Israel. A young man, newly married, with my wife and two friends, I undertook what became in time (one version of) an American Jewish tour. We were students without much money; we drove across Europe in an old car, staying in youth hostels and cheap hotels, stopping to visit the site of the Dachau death camp (and hurrying away), wandering more easily through ancient ruins in Athens, and then sailing from Piraeus to Haifa. Seen from a sufficiently distant perspective, it was an ordinary journey, and certainly it has been made often enough since the 1950s. For me it was extraordinarily moving--and not only for the expected reasons.

The ship on which we had booked passage months earlier turned out to be a refugee ship, which had started its voyage from Genoa. We were the only Piraeus additions and the only paying passengers. The others were Egyptian Jews, fleeing (via Italy) in the aftermath of the Suez war, and Polish Jews, fleeing (also via Italy) in the aftermath of the "Polish October" and the Gomulka reforms. The two groups made an odd combination, hardly exhausting the range of diaspora differences, but standing near its opposing poles. The Egyptians were good bourgeois--petty bourgeois by American material standards but cosmopolitan in the style of Alexandrian Jewry; they all spoke French; they wore suits and dresses every day. They were also, mostly, religious the way Sephardic Jews are religious, easy-going rather than rigidly orthodox, but pious nonetheless, the men regularly assembling for morning prayer in a makeshift synagogue on board. The Poles, by contrast, were entirely secular and mostly communist, professional people rather than merchants, always casually dressed. Appalled when Gomulka allowed priests and Catholic prayer back into the state schools, and sensing that Polish anti-Semitism was also

coming back, they had first pulled their children out of the schools and then negotiated their way out of the country.

Among the Poles was a man in his middle 30s who had made his living translating English books for the state publishing company. He had recently translated Jerome K. Jerome's Three Men in a Boat, a lovely comic novel of Edwardian vintage (political books were not permitted) that my wife and I had read and enjoyed. I have long ago forgotten his name, but he became our friend and interpreter for the duration of the voyage, and he told us a story that is etched forever in my memory. One morning his son, six or seven years old, wandering about the ship, had come upon the Egyptians praying. He watched them, and went back the next morning to watch them again. Then he came to his father with a worried look on his face. "What are they doing?" he asked. "I thought that Jews were people who didn't pray."

The father never told us how he had responded. The point of the story was the thought with which it ended. Indeed, Polish communist Jews were people who didn't pray, and the boy had been taken out of school, separated from his classmates, so that he would not be forced to recite Catholic prayers (Jewish prayers would have been equally alien to his parents). But Egyptian Jews were people who did pray, and who set themselves apart from their Muslim and Coptic neighbors by the prayers they recited. What did these two groups have in common?

Also on board the ship were a couple of representatives of the Jewish Agency, sent to help the Egyptians and Poles prepare themselves for life in Israel--a life, after all, that they had neither expected nor sought. These refugees were not Zionist militants. The Poles would have been taught an anti-Zionist ideology; the Egyptians were without any ideology at all; they had simply been comfortable in their diaspora home. The Agency people paid no attention to us, and probably felt a little contemptuous of touring American

students. They talked to the refugees about where they would be taken once they arrived, about what kinds of assistance they would receive, about how important it was to learn Hebrew, and about the jobs that were likely to be available to them. And they tried to stir a little feeling for the land and state of Israel. They taught the children the songs and dances of the Israeli youth movements; they taught the Poles to sing Hatikvah ("The Hope"), the Zionist anthem--the Egyptians already knew it, for the song had escaped the movement and entered the synagogue decades earlier. There were a few low-key lectures, talks really, in French and Polish, on Israeli history and politics. The refugees seemed anxious and self-absorbed; the Agency people wisely didn't push too hard.

We were all on deck when Mt. Carmel, just south of Haifa harbor, came into view, our first glimpse of what the Egyptians, but not the Poles, knew as the "promised land." But it was one of the Poles who began, softly and hesitantly, to sing Hatikvah. And then all of us were singing, and most of us weeping, and I understood very clearly what these people had in common. They shared the hope for a place where they could live in safety and feel at home, as Jews who prayed and as Jews who didn't pray. And for them there was no other place.

For my wife and myself, there was another place, even another promised land, America, die goldene medinah of our parents and grandparents, and we would go back there after a few months in Israel. So what did we have in common with the Egyptians and the Poles? Of course, I had an intellectual answer to that question. I wouldn't have been on the ship if I hadn't already been in some sense a Zionist. I believed in the unity of the Jewish people and in the right of the Jews to national liberation and in the urgent importance, after the Holocaust, of Jewish statehood. What I came to understand between Piraeus and Haifa was the emotional correlate of those beliefs. My feeling of kinship with the people on board was so strong that even today I have no words to express

it--nor, after 45 years of writing, do I feel any need for words. Ever since that time, I have been a Zionist not only for all the other reasons but also because of that boy, who was so suddenly unsure about what it means to be a Jew and so suddenly caught up in the Jewish experience.

I have higher hopes for Israel than that it be a place where children like him can grow up safely and figure out who they are. But that is the first thing that it has to be. Whenever my hopes lead me to criticize this or that Israeli government or policy, which happens often, I remember the Egyptians and the Poles on that ship in 1957. I suppose they have made a home in Israel and because they have, because they could, their Israel is mine too.

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