

Summer Study in Jerusalem: A Jet-Lagged Report

Shabbat Pinchas 5777

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I arrived in Little Rock this afternoon, more than 24 hours after arriving at the airport in Tel Aviv last night. It's about 3am in Israel at the moment. I promised you a jet-lagged report. I'm delivering.

I spent the last ten days at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a pluralistic Jerusalem home for Jewish learning. I attended its annual Rabbinic Torah Seminar, focused this year on significant dates in Zionist and Israeli history ending in the number seven. 2017 marks the centennial of the Balfour Declaration, the seventieth anniversary of the United Nations Partition Plan, and a half-century since the Six-Day War. The title for the ten days was, "The Legacy of the Past and the Future of Modern Israel," indicating a program much broader than history. We studied text – yes, including secular documents like the Geneva Convention and the International Declaration of Human Rights – but mostly Jewish texts: Bible, Talmud, and Midrash. We also immersed ourselves in modern Hebrew literature. We considered Zionism's meaning for each of us and our communities, with history and tradition as our guides.

This evening, I would like to share with you my own "take away" from just one morning of study, a lesson with noted educator Rachel Korazim. Korazim entitled the session, "Anxiety, Euphoria, and Concern: Poetic Voices of Israel 1967-1970." Those three words – anxiety, euphoria, and concern – describe themes that naturally emerged from Israeli poets before and in the immediate aftermath of the Six-Day War. They also signal appropriate responses to the Jewish State in 2017.

Immeasurable anxiety preceded the Six-Day War. The Jewish world teetered on the edge of a second Holocaust. Arab leaders promised no less, amassing armies on Israel's borders and vowing Israel's destruction. Israeli municipalities dug graves – in some instances, mass graves – in solemn preparation. Families living in homes without bomb shelters dug trenches to serve as makeshift bunkers.

Amnon Grof was a child at the time. Grof is not a poet, but a noted painter. Rachel Korazim is his friend on Facebook, the only place where his poem is "published." Korazim reproduced and translated it for us with Grof's permission:

The awaiting period was pretty stressful.
It seemed, though, that the stress had not affected my father,
who took command over three hoes,
two wheelbarrows, one pick, two shovels,
four plastic buckets, his wife and three sons.
After that, he marked the spot with pegs and white builders' rope,
a long rectangle in the middle of the garden,
exactly where we used to plant, once a year,
plum and peach trees,
and uprooted six months later
the dead
plum and peach trees.
So, right in the cemetery of
Future marmalade trees, he had marked a rectangle
And distributed among us digging tools.
And we – each with his/her hoe or shovel or pick, in our hands --
started digging the pit;
the most exemplary perfect pit
in the whole neighborhood.
The rusted iron rods and huge blocks of lime,
as well as the many broken bricks we encountered
on our way down to the belly of the earth
were the proof that our neighborhood was built on the rubble
left behind from the construction of the adjacent neighborhood.
They were also the reason for the untimely death of tens of
innocent fruit trees.
The iron and brick and lime
did not stop my father from having an earth bench
along the pit
and earth or cement stairs
leading into it.
Over the pit, railway ties were placed,
and above them a small hill was raised;
remnants from the next neighborhood's rubble.
Later, my father went to the war.
We did not use the pit, not even once,
during the six days. We did paint our car lights dark blue.

We did cover our windows with black poster boards.
Later, for a year or two
the pit functioned as the “tent” we built of chairs and sheets
when our parents were not at home.
Then, my father filled it with red soil
and planted above it green grass and a large iron swing set
which did not bear fruit but did not die either
until I ripped the house down.

The elder Grof’s anxiety, together with grave- and trench-digging soon, gave way to ecstasy. In Israel and around the world, the symbol of victory is a picture of paratroopers at the Western Wall, Rabbi Shlomo Goren sounding the shofar and declaring, “The Temple Mount is in our hands.” The 1967 battle for Jerusalem, though, was relatively easy, the war won in its first three hours, as the Israeli Air Force eliminated enemy air power before it ever left the ground.

The most famous poem associated with that war was mostly written several months earlier. Naomi Shemer wrote *Yerushalayim shel zahav*, “Jerusalem of Gold,” for a song context. We shall hear it from David and Richard in a few minutes, including the verse that Shemer added after the victory.

Israeli and American Jews treasured “victory albums,” photographic books chronicling the miraculous victory, often enhanced with poetry. The euphoria was tremendous. Amos Ettinger even penned verse, which became a popular song, about Sharm El-Sheikh, a beach town on the coast of the Sinai Peninsula:

Great is the night and it’s smiling at you.
We have returned at dawn to Sharm El-Sheikh.
We crossed through the night, the sea and the mountain,
Arriving in the morning at the straits.
You’re Sharm El-Sheikh,
We’ve returned to you once again.
You are always in our hearts,
Always in our hearts.

Ettinger would recognize the irony in his poem only years later. Sharm El-Sheikh was never part of the Land of Israel. How could we say that we had “returned” there, that an Egyptian port would be “always in our hearts?” Indeed, Israel returned Sharm El-Sheikh to Egypt under the terms of the Camp David

Accords. In 1967, though, rational minds gave way to ecstasy, and our people sang of “returning” to a foreign vacation spot.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman explains that the 1948 War of Independence did not change much in the Jewish self-perception or in the way that Jews were seen in the world. Yes, we had a state, but that moment in history is inextricably bound with the Holocaust. The young state was held together with the proverbial scotch tape. In 1967, though, changed everything. Before 1967, Hartman asks, “Who would want to join ‘the pathetic people of history?’” By contrast, in June, 1967, David had defeated Goliath and had become the Middle East’s super-power. American Jews craved connection to the victorious Jewish State, drawing strength from Israel’s might.

In that euphoric moment, even mourning those lost in battle was muted. How much more, nobody wanted to hear voices of concern. Hanoch Levin, though, expresses those emotions in *Chess*, his own unpopular response to the Six-Day War. Hear now the first and last stanzas:

Where did my child go, my good little child?
Black pawn captures a white pawn.
My father won’t return, never will he come.
White pawn captures a black pawn.
Tears in all the rooms, and silence in the gardens;
the king is playing with the queen.

Where did my child go, my good little child?
Black and white pawns are dead.
My father won’t return, never will he come.
And there’s no white or black pawns.
Tears in all the rooms and silence in the gardens;
on an empty board, only a king and a queen stand.

The celebration that drowned out Levin’s concern ended abruptly on Yom Kippur in 1973. Ever after, Israelis and their friends abroad have lived with Levin’s tears and concerns. Wherever one sits on the political spectrum, all mourn deaths to war and terror; all struggle to determine which next move on the geopolitical chessboard will best secure the future.

Anxiety does not only describe the period of digging graves and trenches, awaiting the next Holocaust. What of Iran’s nuclear capabilities? What if the

Islamic State takes over an Arab nation on Israel's border? How can Israel be both Jewish and democratic if Jews continue to rule a territory that may soon include more Arabs than Jews? Progressive Jews and our secular supporters fear not having a place in Israel, while ultra-Orthodox Israelis dread losing their powerful prerogatives. Israelis may not be digging graves or trenches, but anxiety characterizes Israel in 2017.

Euphoria took a holiday with the Yom Kippur War, the incursion into Lebanon, the first and second Intifada, to name only a few. Still, pride and even arrogance may still be found in abundance, in Israel and among its supporters. We extol the technological and business miracles of "Start-Up Nation." Israelis are justly proud of the powerful, successful State that the Jewish people has built in seven short decades since the Holocaust. Joy continues to characterize Israel in 2017.

I needn't explain that Israelis are concerned. The controversy over egalitarian worship at the Western Wall has raised long-standing anxiety about the relationship between the world's two largest Jewish communities in North America and Israel. The political left and right are as divided in Israel as Democrats and Republicans in the United States, if not more so. Those who still favor a two-state solution search in vain for a road map to get there, while one-state proponents feverishly seek a formula that wouldn't sacrifice at least the veneer of democracy.

In our Torah portion, Pinchas, a zealot, wins a covenant of peace with God. Perhaps the message is that peace may come even from those who seem least eager to bring it. As we sing of a golden Jerusalem, let us pray that our anxiety and concern, and even our euphoria, may give way to the blessing of peace.

Amen.