



What Sort of Jewish State?

The Palestinians and the world are not stupid. They know quite well that we are a Jewish and democratic State. Their deeds leave no doubt that they know the facts. One day they will get their tongues around the words.

Why do we make such a song and dance about our Jewishness? Is it Jewish because historically it was always our homeland, because most of its inhabitants are Jewish, its language is Hebrew, its national ways and days are Jewish... or is there a deeper spiritual-cultural reason?

I know how I define a Jewish State, why my children chose to live here, and my wife and I made Aliyah - because Israel has a Jewish mystique that enables a Jew to find him- or herself as a Jew.

Theodor Herzl, born next to the Dohany Street Synagogue in Budapest, was no conventional pietist, but he said that Zionism meant a return to Judaism even before a return to Zion. Let me delve deeper. I believe that Jewish sources imply ten benchmarks for a Jewish state:

- >>> Belief in God
- >>> Commitment to Torah
- >>> Devotion to Jewish learning
- >>> Ethical conduct
- >>> Spiritual and cultural creativity
- >>> Influence on Jews
- >>> Outreach to the world
- >>> Jewish continuity
- >>> Recognition of Biblical prophecy come true
- >>> A concept of the state as a stage in messianism

Let's examine the reality. Better than the static approach ("what are the facts?") is the dynamic one ("what are the trends?"). Not "What is Israel today?" but "What is Israel becoming?" These are the trends as I see them:

- >>> Belief: Ideological atheism is receding. Even those who say God is not part of their lives are searching for meaning. Even those who don't want to be orthodox, think Shabbat is good for the planet. Those who never don a kipa still attend a Seder and make a b'racha. What a pity that so many are put off by what Lord Immanuel Jakobovits called "the unacceptable face of orthodoxy".

>>> Torah: The strength of Torah does not depend on how many people vote for the religious parties but on how much Judaism the Israeli people would opt for if they weren't afraid of the charedim getting control of the State. Most would like to see what Jewish ideas could contribute to civil law and government.

>>> Jewish learning: Torah learning is a growth industry; yeshivot are opening all the time, for women too, with an array of outlooks and ideologies - even secular yeshivot, a sign that many are thirsting for their heritage. Not enough, however, is done to inject Jewish content into the state school system.

>>> Ethical conduct: Chaim Weizmann wanted Israel to be "a high civilisation based on the austere standards of Jewish ethics". Corruption, power-hunger and intolerance are blots on the State and must be eradicated. In the broader sense, the health funds, government agencies, businesses and banks should be kosher. The chief rabbinate should have the courage to be a prophetic voice for the broad ethical principles of the Jewish tradition.

>>> Spiritual/cultural creativity: Israeli science, technology and culture are great products of the Jewish mind. But Rav Kook used to

say, "May the time come when those who are great among the Jews will be great as Jews." How strange that we have so few spiritual geniuses in Israel!

>>> Influence on Jews: World Jewry is having a hard time. But Dickens said the worst of times was also the best of times. Israel's chief export used to be oranges. Now it is teachers, books and religious appurtenances, even ideas and insights. Our chief import is olim - but we should also import and take note of the opinions of those who choose to remain in the Diaspora. Our opinions are not always right: theirs are not always wrong.

>>> Outreach to the world: Israel's resurgence and survival inspire millions of gentiles, especially Christians brought up on the Bible. The anti-Israel humbug does not necessarily reflect grass roots opinion. Israel's work for other nations enriches the world... but to be fully Jewish we must play a larger role in the arena of ethics. Else we will be, in Heschel's words, a messenger who has forgotten the message.

>>> Continuity with Jewish history: Everywhere in Israel the past comes alive. But some Israelis have only heard of Hillel and Shammai because of street names. Are they aware of

the real Hillel and Shammai, the real Rabbi Akiva and Rambam? Israel must not let itself come adrift from Jewish history.

>>> Biblical prophecy: So much of what was foretold has come true in the way the prophets described. The best argument for Israel is the Jewish presence here throughout history, regardless of absurd allegations that the Temple never was and that the Western Wall was part of a mosque. Christianity dare not be silent at such claims or it undermines its own history and credibility.

>>> Messianism: Israel, for all its drawbacks, moves me so deeply that I feel it has a messianic dimension. Shubert Spero said, "Jewish messianism is not identical with mere national restoration of Zion or a political ingathering, but it must certainly include these events, and the process may very well start with these events."

Is Israel a Jewish State? It has both credits and debits. Ignore the credits - and you malign a solid record of faith and fulfilment. Ignore the debits - and you forget that we still have work to do. Tradition says the redemption will come like the dawn, little by little.

This is my take: Israel is a Jewish State... *in the making*. Israel is a Jewish State... *on the way to becoming worthy of the dream*. **OZ**