ISRAEL AT 50

by DAVID CAPITANCHIK[1]

August 1997 marked the centenary of the first Zionist Congress, the aim of which was comprehensive yet simple: "Zionism aims at the creation of a home for the Jewish people in Palestine to be secured by public law."

It was an anodyne phrase for what were essentially complex revolutionary ideas. The Jewish problem, as it was newly posited by the Congress, lay not in the concerns of the non-Jewish populations amongst whom European Jewry lived, but in the low moral condition of the Jews engendered by their constant fear of physical annihilation and the daily degradation of their cultural and psychological environment. The solution prescribed was for political and social autonomy in a territory in which Jews could attain majority status and hence self-government. In short to be as other people.

Zionism though new to its Jewish audience was heir to the revolutionary ideas of the nineteenth century. Nothing in the 20th century has captured the collective imagination like the beliefs encapsulated in socialism, or the compelling imperatives of nationalism or the seeming logic of Marxist theoretical analysis. Although particularistic in its aim and therefore more circumscribed in its appeal, Zionism, at least that system of ideas influential until the foundation and early years of the State of Israel, reflected the great and often competing ideologies of the nineteenth Century.

Like its Marxist precursor, the leadership of the Zionist movement was drawn not from the traditional sources of influence, in this case business and synagogue, but from a class of intellectuals. Open to hitherto alien ideas, it was a class able to both formulate and transmit the need for far-reaching changes in community belief and action. Like socialism, Zionism eschewed the remote otherworldly future espoused by orthodox religion. Deliverance from persecution and poverty was to be found in the material world of men and work. The nationalistic, territorial element of Zionism, that strand of belief that has persisted long after the demise of socialism and the demonstrable irrelevance of Marx, initially sought to give firm foundation to a group identity hitherto based on somewhat tenuous ideas of a shared culture.

The realisation of the Zionist dream seems to have solved some problems, only to raise others. In many respects, Zionism, as a political/cultural movement, has been one of the great success stories of the twentieth century and the joining of people and land has diminished, if not entirely eliminated, certain fundamental Jewish characteristics, such as a sense of inferiority and dependence. Within fifty years of its inception its main goal was achieved. A relatively small number of committed settlers, reinforced by survivors of the holocaust, proclaimed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, survived the initial onslaught of the armies of its hostile neighbours and then proceeded to absorb millions of penniless immigrants. Fifty years on, Israel is both militarily and economically a regional power, no longer seriously threatened by its immediate neighbours, although other states in the area still threaten its annihilation, albeit as part of their more general challenge to the regional status quo.

What are significant, however, are the changes in interpretation and understanding that the simple resolution enunciated at Basel has undergone. Like all great belief systems, its very simplicity has encouraged not only exegesis but also confrontation and dispute between those who see themselves as the true believers and those who are considered wayward if not downright heretical.

The existential circumstances of the Jewish Diaspora have greatly influenced the development of the original concept so that its core purpose – the unification and preservation of Jewish existence has been adapted to suit the circumstances of different audiences. There is a major distinction to be drawn between Zionism as a political movement leading to the realisation of clear-cut political goals, namely the ingathering and settlement of Jews in a Jewish State, and Zionism as an expression of Jewish life in the Diaspora. Paradoxically, in the United States, if not in Britain, Zionism has served to reaffirm and reinforce Jewish identity in a pluralistic multi-ethnic society.

In the Sovereign State of Israel, different interpretations of Zionism lie at the root of the many cleavages that divide its society and characterise its domestic political life as well as its external relations with both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. It is, of course, possible to argue, as many do, that Zionism ceased to have any meaning or relevance once its main aim had been achieved. Indeed, it is doubtful whether it ever had any meaning at all for those who nowadays make up the majority of the citizens of the Jewish State. If it is true that Zionism is essentially a European concept rooted in the ideologies and values of nineteenth century Europe, then what meaning could it have for people originating from the very different, much more traditional world of the Arab Middle East and North Africa? For them, the return to Zion was based upon religious rather than secular values and a desire to be differentiated from their non-Jewish environment. In sum, not to be as other people. For them, the universalistic values of Zionism had no appeal, but rather its particularistic nationalist and Jewish dimensions.

[1] David Capitanchik addressed the Edinburgh Jewish Literary Society on 23rd November 1997 on this theme

The evolving nature of Israeli society has had a profound impact on its political complexion. From the point of view of Israel's domestic politics, the history of the past 50 years falls into two distinct phases. The first, the period of the Yishuv and the two decades following the founding of the State in 1948; and the second, the last thirty years from roughly the Six-Day War to the present day.

Possibly the difference between these two periods can best be summed up by the lifestyles of the country's political elites. For Israel's founding fathers a frugal lifestyle was more than a necessity imposed by economic and political constraints. They turned frugality into an ideal in itself, establishing educational institutions that inculcated these values; youth movements that implemented them; and a network of cultural institutions that elevated them into a national ethos. Thus Prime Minister Ben Gurion and his wife Paula lived in a modest flat in Tel-Aviv with no servants. Guests at their dinner table would report on the Prime Minister's impatience that they should finish eating quickly so that he could get on with the washing up.

In stark contrast, the Israeli media now reports ad nauseam on the lifestyle of the Netanyahus, with their much-abused Nannies and the Prime Minister's shoe-polisher, recently dismissed by the First Lady because in her view the shine on the Prime Ministerial shoes was not up to standard.

It is important to realise that Netanyahu and his Likud predecessors were not responsible for the abandonment of frugality in favour of the current hedonistic Israeli lifestyle. The lifestyle of the Begin Family differed little from that of the Ben Gurions. Pioneers in all things, it was those who established the original norms and their successors who led the way and thereby sowed the seeds of the country's current social, ideological and national crisis.

The changing norms coincided with a major demographic change that had taken place in Israeli society as a result of the mass immigration of the 1950s. This resulted in the so-called 'ethnic divide' becoming one of the main features of Israeli politics, certainly from the elections to the 7th Knesset in 1969, and it has been a main determinant of voting behaviour in all the elections since 1977.

Increasingly, Labour became the party of the older, more conservative and better-off voters, while the Likud appealed to the less well to do and, importantly, the young. In Israel, paradoxically, it has been the middle class with something to lose that has supported the left, while the base of the right-wing parties is among the lower social strata.

It is worth recalling some of the reasons for this phenomenon. First, it was the Labour movement that was the 'establishment' for the first three decades after the founding of the state and for at least twenty years previously. During that time, as the single dominant party, it came to be identified as virtually synonymous with the state and its institutions. In particular, the Labour movement (the Histradrut) also dominated the economy and the system of social welfare. Thus those who regarded themselves as disadvantaged vis-à-vis the better off elements in society, namely the recent immigrants of African-Asian origin, saw Labour as the party of the establishment and, as such, responsible for their condition.

As the traditional opposition party, by contrast, the Likud appealed to those who regarded themselves as 'outsiders' in Israeli society. It was able to offer opportunities for upward social mobility for new generations of young Sephardi activists in the development towns and newly established urban and rural settlements. Upwardly mobile and politically ambitious youngsters of Moroccan origin, for example, first sought careers in the Labour Party, but earlier generations of Sephardi immigrants from Iraq and Yemen already occupied such vacancies as there were in the top positions. They turned instead to the Herut component of the Likud where they came to be regarded among the majority of Sephardi voters, especially in the Moroccan community, as more authentic and legitimate leaders than the senior Sephardim in top Labour posts.

The younger Sephardi voters have seemed to prefer the more individualistic, free market economy favoured by the Likud over Labour's socialist-inspired collectivism. On the cultural-ideological level, the Likud's particularistic nationalism, with its heavy emphasis on patriotism and strong Jewish identity, has reinforced this appeal.

In general then, the policies of the Likud, both domestic and foreign, have done much to enhance the Sephardi self-image and sense of security. In recent elections, it might be argued, support for the Likud and the other right-of-centre parties among young Sephardi voters has been strong. In part this has been due to the fear that a return to Labour dominance might see a return to the old order with its alien values and consequent inferior status for the Sephardi community. The challenge for Labour is whether it can loosen the right-wing hold over this community which now makes up well over half the Israeli electorate.

From the very beginning of the Jewish renaissance in Israel the political life of the growing community encompassed a wide variety of political parties, each with its own ideology and many with affiliated parties among the Jews abroad. Many of the parties became involved in functions not usually associated with political activity. They founded their own schools and economic enterprises, developed housing projects, published daily newspapers and even provided health and other welfare services for their members. In the Yishuv elections were held regularly to determine the composition of the governing bodies of the community;

this included the trade union movement as well as the more formal political institutions. Established political traditions and institutions of the pre-state parties therefore made the transition to an orderly and democratic parliamentary system relatively smooth when the state was founded in 1948.

In view of the above, the country's 'founding fathers' agreed that in order to ensure full representation of the myriad of interests in the Knesset it would be elected in the first instance under a system of pure proportional representation. Later, as the population became more integrated, it was intended to go over to a 'first-past-the-post' system, similar to that in the UK. However, with the advent of mass immigration from the Islamic countries and from Eastern Europe, the society became even more diversified in terms of origin, outlook, tradition and customs. All of these elements have contributed to the political landscape and Israeli politics have reflected, through the party system and through the system of proportional representation, the numerous shades of opinion.

Proportional representation, albeit modified by the introduction of a percentage threshold, itself encouraged the proliferation of political parties. Neither the cash deposit, nor the number of signatures, nor, indeed, the raising of the threshold, discouraged new parties and factions from forming and attempting to win representation in the Knesset.

In 1996, Israelis voted for the first time under a new electoral law. This reform has to be seen against the background of a series of elections in which the two major party blocs won an almost equal share of Knesset seats, making the process of coalition-forming extraordinarily difficult. The religious parties in particular, who had usually been prepared to enter a coalition with either bloc, were able to exploit the situation to their advantage and their extortionate demands were widely resented. Thus the move to the direct election of the Prime Minister grew out of frustration at what was perceived to be the inordinate strength of the religious parties relative to their actual share of the popular vote. Those who advocated the reform assumed that a directly elected Prime Minister would be able to resist extortionate demands and at the same time restore a degree of integrity to what had become a sordid, unprincipled and undignified process of bazaar-style haggling.

Under the new Electoral Law, Israel retains its parliamentary system of government, but with a presidential style Prime Minister confirmed in office not by the Knesset, but by direct popular vote. However, this unique system, unparalleled anywhere else in the world, has demonstrably exacerbated rather than relieved the defects it was intended to remedy. For one thing, in contrast to the past, the Prime Minister is no longer the leader of the largest faction in the Knesset.

David Capitanchik is a member of the Management Executive of Aberdeen College and is Honorary Senior Lecturer in Politics at Aberdeen University. He is a member of the research board of the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. He is an acknowledged expert in Middle East politics and Israeli elections and is in much demand as a broadcaster on this and other subjects.

In Spring 1996 we visited friends in Denmark and they took us to the village of Gilleleje where during the war the loft of the Lutheran church had sheltered Jews before they were transported across the straits to Sweden by local fishermen. Many hundreds escaped the Holocaust this way but there came a final betrayal and a loft full of Jews found themselves taken to a death camp instead of freedom.
When we arrived it was a glorious, sunny day and the pastor wearing the traditional cassock and white goffered ruffled us up the narrow winding stairs to show us the loft space and the commemorative plaque in memory of both saved and slaughtered. It was difficult to speak for the noise of the rooks nesting in the trees outside yet the loft was full of the silence of its past and those who had sheltered there.

Nests

Heralded by rooks in open trees,
their invented nests a crown of noise and fierce intent,
I entered a neat loft
well tiled, accessible, where others nested.
The pastor bore his smile on a tray,
curling up the narrow stair
to show betrayal's shining face was
now a polished plaque; a smooth surface
levelling suffering to acceptance.
A bitter fragrance.
A squeak in the eaves.
I heard the waiting boats creak in the bay
and pull at the restraining ropes.
In darkness they had carried frightened cargo
across grey waters.
Grey freedom that turns bread to roses
that returning will infuse memory's sour incense
with promises.

Joyce Caplan