

ISRAEL: SIGNIFICANCE AND REALITIES

by

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After the October War, when I first attended a consultation of the Steering Committee of the International Council of Christians and Jews, I suggested that we should have a meeting for once in Israel. At that time it was just my feeling that any organization which seeks a meaningful encounter between Christians and Jews can no longer do so in our world without having experienced the reality that is Israel. And therefore, when several years later the theme of this conference was formulated: "Israel: Significance and Realities", I discovered what such a meeting involves and what it can mean.

Let me explain further by trying to impress upon you, the fact that the meeting took place here in order to experience Israel's present-day realities and problems within the framework of the International Council of Christians and Jews. This was at a time when the country was in a period of intensive rethinking. I believe that this is not the Israel which we would have encountered three, four, five or six years ago. This society, the Jewish society of this country, certainly, is trying to define its very dream, its very assets. I think that the very meaning of Zionism, the ideology that brought the State of Israel into being, the very meaning of the wording and its concept has to be, and is being, investigated. The relationship between Diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jewry is a problem that has to be restated and researched as well, and certainly the relationship of the Jewish people to other peoples and religions in the international arena.

We came together at a time in which paradoxes emerge in whatever is meant by the term 'Israel'. There can be little doubt, when surveying only the lifetimes of two generations, one spanning the period between the First and Second World Wars, and the other the post-Second World War times, that in the very establishment of the State, the Zionist idea as it was developed since the end of the last century has realized some of its major objectives. You have encountered here a very developed society which in spite of the tremendously precarious situation in which it lives, has provided the Jewish people with a new societal structure — political sovereignty.

* Remarks made at the closing session of the Jerusalem Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews, 30 June 1976, which included delegations of 14 different countries.

People who came as refugees to this country from the orient and the occident, pitiful remnants of once thriving communities, managed to overcome the shattering experiences of their lives and to restructure themselves as individuals and as a society. You saw a flourishing country which, only a few decades ago, to a large degree had been barren and neglected. You encountered the new Hebrew culture which possesses all the assets of any modern culture expressed in the revived ancient tongue of the Jews. In all these respects, the Zionist idea indeed has borne fruits. However, when one takes a closer look at the situation, one has to admit that the classical conception of Zionism has, nevertheless, fallen short of achieving the aims that it set for itself, to a degree which may require a re-definition of the targets of Zionism at this stage. This indeed cannot cause any surprise if you bear in mind that classical Zionist thought was developed in an area and in an era which were totally different from the contemporaneous situation. Modern political Zionism evolved in the pre-First World War period when the scene of international relations was totally different from what it is now. At that time, 'Zionism' was to a large degree, an ideology which had its roots in biblical hopes of a return and the messianic expectations which Israel carried throughout its history. It was not a blueprint for action or, to say the least, activated only by a comparatively small segment of the Jewish people in the Diaspora, mainly in countries where the Jew had remained a stranger to the surrounding society, oppressed, persecuted, killed. A definite change occurred with the establishment of the State of Israel which in itself marked the achievement of one of the great goals of Zionism. The citizens of the State, and especially those born in the country, now went to work at top speed to translate ideas into realities. The population of Israel was overcome by a tremendous urge for action, so much so that the very term 'Zionism', which was considered to be coterminous with 'talking about ideas', almost was shunned in this country which pressed for action. It seems as if the attitude of the Israelites at Mount Sinai, when accepting the law, who then exclaimed, "*Na'aseh we-nishma*" – "Let us do, and (then) hear" (or "think over") – was paraphrased in a modern way by the new Israel.

In those days, Zionism meant for Jewry the beginning of the ingathering of the Jewish people in its Promised Land which was expected to take on the character of totality, in history and not in eschatology. Today, the very existence of the State has given this idea a very special realistic chance of fulfilment. But at the same time the scene of Diaspora Jewry has changed to such a degree that it has become doubtful whether a total ingathering of all Jews in Israel can even now be proclaimed as the overwhelming aim of Zionism. The appeal of such a total ingathering within an appreciable future is no longer fully acceptable to the thriving, budding communities of Jews in the Western world which have risen out of the ruins of Eastern European and Oriental Jewry. Today it is probably only in Russia

and other parts of the world, like the Arab countries, where Jews live again or still in those same precarious circumstances of pre-World War One Jewry that the traditional idea of Zionism – “Let my people come” – has an immediate existential meaning. This cannot be, and is not, the case with Jewry in the free world.

Zionist thinkers believed that the ingathering of the Jews into a Jewish sovereign state would bring about the end of antisemitism. Alas, also this aim did not materialize. It seems that the establishment of the State in fact has created a new antisemitism which in many respects is even worse than the classical antisemitism it had meant to overcome. Zionism was held to be coterminous with the normalization of the Jewish people. This came true with regard to the status of the individual Jew in Israel and in the Jewish communities of the free world. And the very existence of a sovereign Jewish State certainly spells societal normalcy which has affected also the status and the attitude of Jewish communities all over the world. One could believe that Israel has indeed become a people like all other peoples. But, in fact, and paradoxically the establishment of the Jewish State has proved just the opposite: it has proved that Jewish people for ever and ever cannot become a ‘normal’ nation like all other nations. The State of Israel, in spite of appearances, is not a normal State. I hardly need to remind you of the attempts that have been made again and again in many quarters, and with some success, to brand this State an outcaste. Where once Jews were considered, to quote Max Weber, the German sociologist, to be pariah people, now the Jewish State is considered a pariah State. Zionism seems to have resulted in almost the opposite of what it had set out to achieve. It has underlined the peculiarity of the Jewish people and has put this recognition into a special focus, in any setting, whether in the Diaspora or even in the setting of its own sovereign State.

Moreover, that classical ideological Zionism was utopian to the core. It was fired by the imagination of modern political prophets who drew upon the enthusiasm of their ancient counterparts. Its supporters believed in a world of peace which was just around the corner. It is almost tragicomic to remember that Theodor Herzl, the founding father of modern political Zionism, conceived that the Jewish State never would need an army and could be satisfied with setting up a token home guard, because it would be neutral in the political arena, befriended by all the nations. The Jewish State was to become the realization of the biblical vision – “a light unto the nations”. Today, because of its strenuous situation and its being rejected by so many nations, you find yourself in a State of Israel armed to its teeth. Modern Zionism as represented by the State, has to take care of very concrete and pressing problems and has to defend itself against those who deny the very right of existence. Therefore Zionism of today cannot any more be the Utopia that it once was. It must be down-to-earth. Zionism in modern

Israel has realized that it has only one thing in common with Utopia, and herein lies the tragedy of its very existence: like Utopia, it has no neighbours. This certainly is not something anybody could have wished for when he dreamt about Zion and the normalization of the Jewish people.

From all this follows that, after fifty, sixty, seventy years of practised Zionism, circumstances forced us to rethink and re-evaluate our premises and basic propositions. When you depart from this country, I would like you to take with you the notion that you sojourned for a short time in a society which is in the throes of a deep rethinking of its very own being. And don't let the looks of what appears to be a society which lives safely within the certainty of its traditional notions mislead you in the interpretation of what you have experienced.

As I said, that stage of preparing for statehood and building the State was a period whose essence could have been captured in the saying, "Let us do, and then listen and think." Now, I believe, the attitudes of many people have been reversed. Now the motto is, "*Nishma we-na'aseh*" – let us sit back and reflect about what we are supposed to do. Nobody can offer any clear-cut, and certainly not any permanent, solution to the problems with which we are confronted. But this much can be said: the people of Israel are aware of these problems and try to reason out ways in which to cope with them.

Among many other issues to be considered, as I already said, is the new relationship which has developed between Israel and her citizens and Diaspora Jewry, which is strongly represented at this conference. The idea that the State and the people ingathered in it would become a successor to Diaspora Jewry, which should have disappeared progressively after the establishment of the State, has not worked out. And I do not believe that it will do so in an appreciable future. Quite to the contrary, there has developed, against the background of the last ten years or so, a new balanced companionship, a new equality of the Diaspora and the centre of Judaism which is in Israel. The shared responsibility for the State is very much felt and recognized by Diaspora Jewry because, whether one likes it or not, whatever befalls Israel reflects on Jews in the Diaspora. Vice versa, any issue that affects Diaspora Jewry cannot remain without effect on Israel.

This new shared responsibility must be studied in the context of the work of the International Council of Christians and Jews, because it reflects also on the encounter of Christianity with Judaism. It is, to my mind, no longer possible for any Christian community, be it in Germany, France, the United States, England or any other country, including even Russia or Syria, to deal with their own Jewish counterparts in isolation from other Jewish groups, and especially from the State of Israel. British Jewry, or French Jewry, etc., in their relations to the surrounding world, cannot be conceived of any more without reference to the State of Israel. History has proved that

whether we want it or not, all Jews are in one boat. The recognition of this fact must decisively influence the relationship between Jewish communities and between them and their Christian neighbours, as well as the encounter between Judaism and other religions. Israel yet can provide a safe haven for any Jew in the world. In order to be able to do so, the Law of Return has become in fact part and parcel of our Declaration of Independence. Once this is realized, the fallacy of the attacks against this law will become apparent. But the safety of this safe haven can be maintained only as long as Diaspora Jewry conceives of itself as a partner in that historic enterprise which is the State of Israel.

During your stay in this country you have become acquainted with some of the vicissitudes that are the share of the State of Israel by its very being part of the Middle East, or of the "Muddle East" as a great Englishman once put it. This part of the world constitutes not only a cross-road where the ways of the three monotheistic or biblical religions meet. It is also the hub of a population mix which has been milling around in it from days immemorial. This area, in history, never was occupied or settled by only one ethnic group or type of population. It has seen empires rise and wane and it has seen peoples come and go. Through these parts there crossed, and in these parts there lived, Canaanites and Israelites, Assyrians and Babylonians, Persians and Greeks, Romans and the Arabs, Western and Eastern Christians. It always had a core of Jewish population. Historically speaking, there is no truth in the claim that this is Arab territory, or that only Middle Eastern peoples have inhabited it throughout the ages. The presence of a new Jewish State in this area, whether constituted as in the past of a European majority, or of a non-European, in fact Oriental majority as in the present, is profoundly legitimate. To present the Jewish State as a foreign enclave by claiming that this is and always has been an exclusively Arab area, an argument which you have certainly heard at home and also while you have been here, is a complete misconstruction of the history of this part of the world.

In this area and in this State of Israel a new type of Jew is developing. I would be hard pressed, in all truth, to tell you by what characteristics this Jew can be recognized. It would be premature to attempt such a definition. One cannot demand of a society that has existed as a society only for two or three generations that it should have already fully developed its own character and mapped out its destiny. I hope that we shall be given time to further develop these incipient characteristics, and some day to be better able to define the specific identity of the Jew who lives in the sovereign State of Israel. Israel indeed has already definite achievements to its record, but cannot be, or possibly cannot yet be, presented as a light to the nations. To expect this of the people of Israel already at this stage is highly unjustified. It is, I believe, morally wrong to expect of this society

that it embody the utopian ideas of the biblical prophets which no other people, no other religion, has been able to put into practice for close on three thousand years. You cannot demand this of a new society, to do so in the span of twenty-five years.

Israelis are not angels, but this does not mean that they are devils; the choice is not only between the two extremes. To put this in a light vein, think of the two husbands who compare the virtues of their wives, and when one says, "Mine is an angel", the other counters by saying, "Mine too is inhuman". You will agree there is a good range of possibilities in between. And this, I suggest, is true of Israel. We are somewhere in between, caught in the criss-cross of lofty ideas and the pragmatic demands of everyday life; longing for peace, but knowing that the old proverb "*Si vis pacem, para bellum*" still is true, alas. You have come across legitimate complaints of individuals and communities, of diverse parts of our population, Jewish or Arab, Christian or Muslim. No doubt many of these complaints have more than a grain of truth in them. But there is one thing which you should keep in mind: all these people are free to complain openly, to state their case, they are not being silenced. This certainly is not enough, but it constitutes an opening for an improvement of the situation. As long as people are allowed to live and to complain about their hardships, they have a chance of bettering their part. "Not the dead can praise God, but only the living." I could not conceive of anybody, though he be full of complaints as a pomegranate of seeds, who would prefer life in Lebanon today to life in Israel.

This brings me to another point, namely that one cannot and should not view the internal problems of Israel in isolation from her external problems. You cannot and should not judge the tangible realities of the composite society that is Israel exclusively against the background of lofty ideas. You must view them against the back-drop of the conditions in which this country lives, inhabited by a population under permanent siege. Wrongs are being done, sometimes out of foolishness, sometimes with ill-will, and sometimes they are construed by false interpretation of facts. You have been alerted to the hard feelings that arise from the present issue of land confiscation. It is certainly something which comes hard to those who are affected by it, and therefore should be very thoroughly investigated and alleviated as much as possible. But do not forget, all these people are alive and are allowed to complain. I wish that such would have been the lot of the Jews in Europe - to have their belongings confiscated but to remain alive.

I referred above to the legitimacy of the Jewish State in the Land of Israel. I believe that this is a fact for the recognition of which by non-Jews, Christians and Muslims, we no longer have to ask. It is now the burden and the responsibility of other peoples and other religions to learn to live with this fact and to accept it with good grace. In an era in which national lib-

eration movements thrive this should not be too difficult. Zionism as a liberation movement is characterized by an 'open nationalism'. It insists on developing the Jewish identity but never bars others or deprived them of the right to develop their own. Our problem is that we are confronted by a 'closed nationalism' which is grounded in the belief that in this area there is room for one nationalism only, and that is the Arab-Islamic one. I believe that we have to work at bringing about attitudes and a situation in which diverse beliefs, religions and political ideas could live together, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in clash, and hopefully always with a chance for reconciliation of diverging claims. It is in the achievement of such a situation that we have to put our hope.

Let me end these somewhat unconnected remarks by telling you how much we, the Israeli members of this conference, have gained from your coming here. You have come from fourteen different countries and came, as I said, into a society that has no neighbours, to a people whose next-door neighbours live across the sea. By coming here you have brought the world closer to us and confirmed us in our belief that in spite of all that has been said and done to prove the opposite we, as individuals, as members of the Israel Interfaith Committee, and as Israelis are indeed full members of an international society, represented here by the International Council of Christians and Jews. For this we thank you.

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