

The Israeli Image . . .

How It Contrasts With America's

By Alfred Friendly

JERUSALEM — Newspapers from home tend to arrive in batches and to be read in great gulps at one sitting. They may thereby leave an impression of America's summer of sickness that is swollen beyond its reality.

Swollen or not, the image they present of our society clamors to be contrasted with the one that emerges here at the end of three months of observing Israel's trial and triumph.

The portrait of the American scene brings the Israeli one into sharper focus and somehow helps make clear what is central to it. Israel is a society that can live with itself. "Alienation," key word in the exposition of what is supposed to afflict America — alienation of young from old, rich from poor, ignorant from educated, dark skin from light — is here unheard of as an idea; unknown as a fact.

There is one huge exception, of course. The quarter of a million Arabs in Israel are in fact alienated. They may have the highest living standard of any Arab population, enjoy infinitely better schooling, also vastly more democratic participation and the most careful regard for their legal and civil rights, yet the Arabs are not part of the mainstream of the Israeli community.

Israelis know this and recognize it as an affront to the principles they champion. But among the 2.5 million Jews, the individual is at peace with his purpose and with his nation's purpose. He is at peace with his fellow citizens.

NO DOUBT Israelis search their souls as much as any educated and introspective people. But they do not seem to ask the question of "Who am I?" or "What is our national life all about?" They believe they know. Their judgment on values, on the kinds of rewards and satisfactions they seek, on what is admirable and deserving, comes close to a national consensus.

It is shared by all elements but the extremists — on the one side the newly

arrived immigrants from the archaic Middle Eastern environments, and on the other the ultrareligious, living almost a life apart. The satisfactions the central body of Israelis seek and the goals they strive for have a plentiful component of the strictly materialistic; Israelis like possessions and luxuries even as everyone else. Yet the desire for the physical goods of life is, it seems, accompanied and tempered by a stronger insistence than elsewhere for the values of the mind and spirit and for a community that honors a moral purpose.

This is not to say that Israel is a nation of doughy sweetness and light, of cloying and placid righteousness, as one suspects last century's utopian societies would have been had they ever been achieved.

Israel has its fair share of hoodlums and Communists, as ugly and as shrilly tiresome, respectively, as hoodlums and Communists anywhere else. It has money-grubbers and corner-cutters, cranks and knuckleheads. And it has as many internal wrangles as a dog has fleas.

The Jews were always a disputatious and quarrelsome people, as the Old Testament makes painfully clear, and they continue to be. They battle among themselves over politics, wrestling with a system of proportional representation that has miserable and even potentially dangerous consequences.

PREJUDICE is far from unknown. The citizen of a European background, the Ashkenazi, looks down his nose and worries about what may happen if the Sephardim, or "Oriental" Jews of North Africa and the Middle East become a majority. The Ashkenazi attitude is sometimes reminiscent of that well known American one that alleges, "If you gave them a bathtub they'd put coal in it."

Yet for all that, the Israelis know themselves to be interdependent and they conduct their national and personal relationships accordingly. They know for whom the bell tolls. When all are brothers, there is no need for, no room for, special categories of brothers, like "soul brothers." In per-

sonal dealings, they are simply not mean to each other.

Why is this so? How did it come about? One can offer a dozen answers, without being sure of any.

Perhaps because it has been dedication to the law for more than 3000 years; the law framed—often cruelly so—to make the community cohesive. Perhaps it was that which makes the Jews, or at least the Israeli Jews, know that they have a clear, inescapable identity, regardless of the fact that most of them are non-observant-tending-to-atheist and pay no heed to the details of the law, which are barbarous and archaic. But the essence of The Law remains with them.

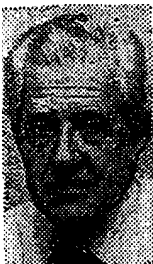
Maybe, instead, it is the personal realization of every migrant that the world rejected his or his family's supposition that they had "passed" or had at least been accepted into a gentile society. Hitler and Stalin proved that the assumption was wrong, that Jews were "separate," not to be assimilated.

MAYBE IT was the threat of extermination, as an individual and as a state, for the last 20 years, at the hands of 50 million neighbors: or the reality of the extermination of six million Jews in the years immediately preceding. Or perhaps it was the other side of the coin: the demonstration that if they did not hang together they would hang separately.

Maybe it was simply the challenge, handed down by the idealists, Jewish and gentile, over the last two centuries, to build a society with the most lofty goals of moral and spiritual satisfaction on the most humble foundations of toil and egalitarianism.

Maybe it was all of these or maybe none. But the fact remains that Israel has built a society to which all its Jewish citizens feel they belong, which is sure of itself and united in its objectives.

The American observer, shattered by every report from home, senses that he finds here, in contrast to his own, a society that is wholesome—except that "wholesome" sounds priggish and namby-pamby, and Israel is anything but that. Say, better, it is a society that is whole.



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