The Israeli Image  

How It Contrasts With America's

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 love as being a movement that is swollen beyond its reality.

So swollen, in fact, that they present of our society clamos to be contrasted with the one that emerges at the end of three months of observing Israel’s trial and triumph.

The portrait of the American scene brings the Israeli into it to see that somehow helps make clear what is central to it. Israel is a society that can live with itself. “Alienation,” key word in the phrase 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 billion Americans are in fact alienated. They may have the highest living standard of any Arab population, enjoy infinitely better health care, 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.

Israel knows this and recognizes 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 mission?” 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 archeic Middle Eastern environment, and on the other the ultra-rational, living as most a life apart. The frustrations 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 it 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 Israelis are not attuned to some sweetness and light, of cloving and placid righteousness, as one suspects last century’s utopian societies would have had. Yet they have been achieved.

Israel has its fair share of hoodlums and Communists, as ugly and as shrilly-tired, if more respectfully, as hoodlums and Communists anywhere else. It has money grubbers and corner-cutters, cranks and knuckleheads. And it has also a clawed and entwined, Circuitousness as a dog has fleas.

The Jews were always a disputatious and quarrel some people, as the Old Testament makes painfully clear, and they continue to be. They battle among themselves over politics, wrestling with a system of pro portionality 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 looks back on times 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 relations 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 personal dealings, they are simple and 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 deduced — the law, for more than 3000 years; the law framed — often cruelly — to make the community cohesive. Perhaps it was that27 entering 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 re jected his or his family’s support that they had “passed” or had at least been accepted into a gentle society. Hitler and Stalin proved that the assumption was false 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 80 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 this, the demonstration that if they did not hang together they would hang separately.

Maybe it was simply the fact which hales the ideologists, Jewish and gentle, 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 unified.

The American observer, shuttered by every report from home, senses that he finds here, in contrast to his land, things is whole some — except that “whole some” sounds priggish and namby-pamby, and Israel is anything but that. Say, better, it is a society that is whole.

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