Li-Heyot Am Hofshi beArtseinu: The As-Yet Unrealized Dream

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Jolene S. Kellner is a reference and periodicals librarian at the University of Haifa; previously she was a public health nurse in an impoverished suburb of Haifa. Menachem Kellner is a professor of Jewish Thought at the University of Haifa and Senior Fellow, Institute for Philosophy, Political Theory, and Religion at the Shalem Center, Jerusalem. This article appears in issue 10 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

When we moved to Israel 30 years ago we sacrificed a number of things: living space (we exchanged a two-story home on a large plot of land for an apartment in a 10-story building) and the excellent, affordable, and personal medical care to which middle-class Americans had then grown accustomed. We also lost Sundays as days off.

What we gained made this all worthwhile: a sense of purpose, a sense of being part of something important that was bigger than ourselves, and, we thought, the opportunity finally to be part of the mainstream.

How did things work out? Rather differently than expected. Israel has grown much more prosperous over the years (if we did not mind the commute, we could sell our large apartment in Haifa and move to a lovely home in the Galilee); medical care here has improved dramatically, while the level of care for middle-class Americans has gone down and the price has gone up, both dramatically. Jewish education here remains problematic, but it is certainly not bankrupting parents, as it is in North America. The five-day week has reached Israel (when it was first proposed to the late Levi Eshkol he is reputed to have said: “First let’s see if we can get people to work for four days, before stretching it to five.”)—with Fridays

replacing America's Sundays as part of the weekend.

Two things particularly surprised us: we raised children with Israeli manners, and we certainly did not become part of the mainstream. Both of us grew up in rabbinical homes, with fathers active in Mizrahi and both fathers and mothers deeply involved in Jewish education, seeing all of the Jewish people as their responsibility. We assumed that we would find like-minded communities here in Israel. That did not turn out to be the case. Over the years we have lived here, the National Religious Party (*Mafdal*), the Israeli branch of the World Mizrahi, engaged in a long drawn-out act of suicide. No longer seeing itself as appealing to and seeking to represent all Jews, Ashkenazi and Sefardi, *dati* and non-*dati*, it first turned itself into the party of Orthodox Zionists, and, after the rise of *Shas*, into a party of Orthodox Ashkenazi Zionists; it then turned its gaze even further inward and turned itself into the party of the Orthodox Ashkenazi Zionist Settlers. It has now transmogrified into the extreme right-wing "*Bayit Yehudi*" party with three members of K'nesset (one of whom we know personally and admire as an individual), two of whom basically speak to each other only through the third.

One of us was here in 1967 as a volunteer on a border kibbutz before, during, and after the war and we both initially shared the widespread enthusiasm for settling the territories occupied during the war. After moving here in 1980, we more and more came to realize the folly of seeking to hold on to the "Greater Land of Israel" and drifted leftward politically, putting us out of synch with our neighbors, with most of our friends from synagogue, and, significantly, with the B'nei Akiva youth movement, to which our children belonged. Israel is a society of clearly defined groupings, with clear labels. We often had the sense that in the eyes of many of our fellow synagogue-goers, political "deviance" was a reflection of religious "deviance." So much for becoming part of the mainstream!

Another issue that distanced us ideologically (if rarely personally) from our friends and neighbors was our growing discomfort with what is usually referred to as "religious coercion." We very much enjoyed living in a Jewish State that was Jewish not only by virtue of the majority of its populace, but also because traditional Jewish holidays were national holidays and the public square used to be recognizably Jewish. It is not important in this context to point fingers of blame for this, but in our 30 years here the public square in Israel has grown ever more secular, ever more distanced from its Jewish roots, just as the religiously observant have largely retreated into self-made ghettos. From our perspective, attempts to force Judaism down the throats of Israelis have boomeranged. Whether that is indeed the cause or not is less important than the fact that the

public face of Israel has changed beyond recognition in our years here.

Let us give one example of this phenomenon. When we moved here, our synagogue had a second minyan for *kol nidre* for our non-observant neighbors, and the entire neighborhood congregated around the synagogue, even if they did not come in. Nowadays, there is no second *kol nidre* minyan, no one hangs around the synagogue, and although most secular Israelis fast and do not drive on Yom Kippur (out of vestigial cultural identification), since the roads are almost entirely empty, they are taken over by kids on bikes and roller blades. That is the Yom Kippur these children will remember when they grow up: fancy bikes and empty roads as opposed to empty stomachs.

To simplify a very complicated process, over the years that we have lived here, Israel has become more and more like America (for good and for ill), and as it has grown ever more American, one might think that the ideological rationale for living here has grown weaker (after all, we came here to participate in the process of building a recognizably Jewish—culturally, not necessarily halakhically— nation, not an imitation North America). That our ideological Zionism has not become attenuated is, largely—it is odd to say—thanks to hatred of Israel in so-called progressive circles around the world. To our surprise, *Li-heyot am hofshi beArtseinu*—to be a free nation in our land—remains *HaTikvah*, the not-yet- realized hope, of the Zionist movement. Thirty years ago it seemed that the hope had been realized; over the last decade it has become clear that our hopeful dream is a nightmare for wide swaths of “enlightened” opinion around the world (and in “elite” circles in Israel). Suddenly, once again, to be a Zionist is to be a revolutionary, to go against the current.

Another surprise: Israel was meant to cure anti-Semitism; sadly, it has not. Only 60 years after the Holocaust, our generation is once again called upon to defend the right of Jews to live and to live as a free nation in its own homeland.

Living in Israel is once again more than simply making a living in Hebrew. We are challenged to show that the dream is worthwhile and attainable. For people like us, that makes living in Israel even more compelling than it was 30 years ago when we made *aliya*.