

Comment

Reflections on Israel

Michael Novak

During those ominous early hours and indecisive days of the war of Yom Kippur, many American Jews were surprised by the depth of their fears concerning the fate of Israel. Such Jews had thought of themselves as powerful, detached, integrated into the larger American society. Suddenly they could not be certain that their colleagues and friends shared the secret dread they began to feel: the nightmare of another possible holocaust.

Christian leaders have sometimes seemed to treat Israel as though it presented an anguishing moral problem: "The question has two sides. There are complexities. Jewish military spirit seems a trifle pushy. Think of the poor, Third-World Arab refugees." One anguishes about sorting out the truly moral thing to do.

Whereas the issue—seen another way—is not a moral perplexity at all. The issue is survival; the prevention of disaster; the avoidance of the overrunning of the Israeli State. Shall Jews forever fear destruction? Shall there never be a safe and stable homeland? The Israeli army cannot withstand a war of attrition; the population is too small to accept weekly lists of dead, wounded and missing in a war even of a year's duration. So for Israel the speedy conclusion of a war is not a luxury; it is a psychic necessity. In this respect, the strategic and tactical balance of power is enormously in favor of the Arabs.

Many of us who came from Central Europe have memories of the helpless feelings in the stomach that some Jews now seem to feel. Arising from the carnage of war, such feelings are not merely humanitarian, the fruit of a sensitive conscience or a profound sympathy for human life. They are closer to the lining of the stomach than that; they are more mixed with the stomach's acid. When Russian tanks rumble into Czechoslovakia, one sees faces like one's own; one feels one ought to be there; the attack is not upon others but upon oneself.

For a thousand years the three million people of the valleys of the Tatra Mountains in Central Europe have tried to preserve their language and their independence. Almost unbroken for these thousand years is, instead, the record of conquest and oppression: under Mongols, Huns, Magyars, Germans, Russians. For only a fitful generation or two, between invasions, have Slovaks tasted freedom, independence and peace. Even today, teachers and writers

are in jail, in labor camps or living in the uncertain fear that constitutes "normality."

To think that the Israelis might, once again in this century, be driven conquered and broken into dispersal is more than the mind can bear.

It cannot be allowed to happen. As nearly as there is a moral absolute in politics, this absolute must be written indelibly into American foreign policy: Israel must not be allowed to be overrun. The reason for this claim is not that the Arabs have no rights to Palestine, or that the million and a half Arab refugees left hostage in Israel have no claims. The reason is what Israel stands for in the universe of moral symbols that command Christian behavior.

We do not live in a world of abstractions or universals; we live in a world whose bonds arise from heritage and culture. As are no other peoples of the world, Jews are a Christian's brothers. The Arabs are our brothers, too; but it would not be truthful to believe we share with them that bond of mingled history and destiny which the Christian shares with the Jew.

A brother can upbraid a brother. If a brother is in the wrong, a brother may side against him and side even with his enemies. But when the brother's survival is at stake, great indeed must be the claims, and concrete the appeals, of justice. A good brother loves justice more than he loves his brother. But what good is a brother who, hearing his brother's cry for life, allows him to go under?

It is not anti-Semitism to criticize Israel. But Christians need to beware. Besides emotional, personal anti-Semitism, there is also a gnostic, institutional anti-Semitism: one loves Jews, but not a Jewish state.

Israel must survive. It is an inflexible Christian imperative. It would profit us nothing to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of Israel. Were Israel lost through fault of ours, the world would lose its savor; the dignity of living would be forfeit.

In all moral matters, particularly in politics, it is wrong to be simplistic. But it is equally wrong in such matters to become too complicated. By the light of the deepest, basic, simple axiom of one's thought, all the latter complications and ambiguities receive illumination. Whatever other principles and conclusions must be introduced into our thinking, the luminous quasi-absolute radiates through all: *Israel must survive.*

The steps necessary to secure that survival—and not mere survival only, but relative health and growth—are shrouded in compromise, ambiguity and the obscurities of practical judgment. The Israelis are subject to criticism for each concrete step they take. Some of these are bound to be—as ours are—errant, unwise and flawed by human vices. Some steps are

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bound to be steps *we* would not (we think from afar) have taken; some are likely to be brazen and full of risk. No matter: loyalty before purity. We will register complaints; we are not a blank cheque; we are friends through the use of intelligence and free discussion. But we will be dependable and loyal.

A great service we can provide to our embattled brothers is the achievement of power and influence in the camp of her enemies. Not merely Israel's survival depends on us. More than that, we can contribute a great deal to the climate within which Israel will survive. The firmness of our directives to Russia and the decency of our dealings with the Arabs determine in large measure the breathing space with-

in which Israel works out its destiny. Great monetary and other efforts on the part of the United States to help the Palestinians might lift from Israel's shoulders the burden of providing virtually alone for Palestinian claims to justice.

Both power politics and an exquisite ear for cultural decencies are required if our inflexible commitment to Israel is to be fruitful.

The survival of Israel's independence is a symbol to Slovakia and other nations that their age-old dream will yet, in history's good time, be realized. If irony may be wrested from tragedy, even the realization of a Palestinian nation is somewhat foreshadowed in the success of Israel.

Reader's Response

Cuba, After Chile's Bloody Fall

James F. Conway

Laurence Birns's fine article, "Chile: A Bloody Fall" (*Worldview*, November, 1973), came to my attention after I returned from a few weeks' visit to Cuba, a visit that coincided with the fall of Allende. The overthrow of Allende drew enormous response.

"*Fidel, Allende, el pueblo les defiende*"—Fidel, Allende, the people will defend you—shouted some 500,000 Cubans who jammed the Plaza of the Revolution on the afternoon of September 28 in Havana. A bold-colored outdoor mosaic locates Chile's martyr catty-corner to the Che Guevara monument and just in front of that of Cuba's liberator, José Martí. Allende's finger is pointing skyward in one of his favorite gestures. The inscription below reads: "The forces of fascism will not crush the Chilean people."

The occasion of this rally in Havana was the thirteenth anniversary of the creation of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR) in Cuba. The event was dedicated in homage to Salvador Allende and solidarity with the Chilean people. A spirit of mourning prevailed as long lines of Cubans filed past the Allende mosaic and inscribed their names in the book of mourning. Chile was as close to them as a Cuban province.

Cubans in Chile had been hunted and hated just before and after the *golpe*. A black Panamanian was hung from a lamppost by a vigilante squad in the Providencia district of Santiago. They thought he

was a Cuban. The military forces were determined to eradicate Cuban influence in Chile. The Cuban ambassador in Chile, Mario Garcia Inchaustegui, who had arrived in Chile three years earlier accompanied by a triumphant motorcade and wall paintings proclaiming "Cuba, Chile, together the free territories of the Americas," exited hastily after the coup in a Russian Aeroflot jet, together with 165 Cuban diplomatic functionaries. He had been wounded during the shooting on the Cuban Embassy. Other Cubans had been dumped at the Argentine border. Many, not as lucky, are still on the missing persons lists.

Beatriz Allende Bussi, small, eight months pregnant, determined, rose before the crowd to speak: "People of Cuba . . . I have come to tell you what was the real attitude, the action and the thought of President Allende against the attack of the traitorous military and fascists." She described the assault on the Moneda Palace and how her father reacted from within the building. He sent her to the Cuban Embassy where she would, hopefully, be able to leave the country with the Cubans (Beatriz's husband is a Cuban diplomat). He scolded her for being at his side in the Moneda in her pregnant condition. As she left by the side door her father said to her: "Tell Fidel I will do my duty." Beatriz wanted to put an end to the rumors that her father had killed himself with the gun that Fidel had given him. Later testimonies from palace guards and the retraction of the suicide rumor by Allende's wife confirmed a bullet-ridden body of Salvador Allende who had promised Fidel, and the Cuban people on his visit to the island

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