

SHARED HOMELESSNESS

By Arthur Green

THERE are times in history when a people engages in a struggle for its soul, a battle over national self-definition that may effect the course of that people's history for many generations. Such a moment existed in France on the eve of its revolution, in the United States in the era of the Civil War, in Russia in 1917. Such a struggle is taking place within the Jewish people, in Israel and throughout the world, in our own time. Decisions regarding relations between the Israeli/Jewish and the Palestinian/Arab peoples, steps taken or not taken in the next few years, will determine our ancient people's role in future history, severely testing the moral strength of a nation known more than any other for the great moral vision it has given to humanity.

Jewish history is divisible broadly into three parts: the history of ancient Israel, a small but proud nation living in its land; two millennia of exile and wandering, with national creativity limited mostly to the spiritual and literary realms; and the return to Zion, beginning in 1896 with Herzl, or in 1948 with the proclamation of the State of Israel. Considering the millennia of our nation's history, we are still at the very dawn of our third age.

The first period in Jewish history produced the Hebrew Bible. The Scripture bore with it the call to a single God. In the vision of Israel's prophets, he was able to transcend the need for sacrifice and appeasement and was worshipped by acts of human kindness, by moral living, and by the creation of a just society ruled by law. It was this moral vision of the prophets, together with the religious passion of the Psalmists and the noble legalism of Deuteronomy, that made Israel a great nation. The gift of ancient Israel to human civilization, including the spawning of Christianity and Islam, is truly without measure. For those of us who affirm either Judaism or Christianity or Islam, Israel was the bearer of a divine gift, one that has ultimate meaning in human history.

What is it about the second era of Jewish history that we have to share? What can others learn from the two thousand years of Jewish persecution, wandering, and exile? Perhaps it is the experience of exile and homelessness that we have to offer the world. The Jews were

the first people, at least in the Western experience, to survive a seemingly endless history of homelessness while preserving their identity, their faith and culture, and their dream of returning home. This experience of uprootedness is now common to vast portions of the world's population. I think first of such relatively "old" diasporas as those of the Armenians, the Greeks, and the Chinese. To these we may add Pakistanis in Britain, Turks in Germany, Hispanics in the United States. Then too we may think of millions of dislocated villagers, especially in the Third World, living in shantytowns on the edges of great cities to which they remain cultural, and often even linguistic, strangers.

All of these are uprooted from their homelands, as we were, anxious to preserve memory, to re-create roots, to combine adjustment to the present with loyalty to the past.

What do we have to teach them? Can we share with them the way of Torah, the way a land and Temple-centered civilization was transformed into one of learning, tradition, and celebration of sacred time, one that can be carried with you each time you are expelled and forced to wander further? This is the question facing the Jewish people today: Now that we have a land again, are we willing to share our experience in homelessness?

FOR those of us who see history as a source of meaning, surely it can be no coincidence that the Jewish people's third age and recovery of homeland begins in the same decade of great post-colonial upheaval when homelessness becomes an almost universal part of the human condition. The return to Israel is a gift of our history that should enable us to take a role as elder guides to the homeless. The land should offer us the security to teach, to share our experience with others. But since the task was too great (even God, after all, chose just Abraham, having failed at converting "all humanity"), we have been given an additional challenge: a homeless people, the Palestinians, at our very gates, rendered homeless, whatever the details, by our own return. What are we going to do about them? Will we allow ourselves to call them brothers and sisters? Will we see something familiar in their wretched homelessness? Can we, the world's longest suffering refugees, fail to see in their camps something of our own experience?

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This is the challenge that faces us Jews today, the struggle that threatens to tear our soul in two. We are, to be sure, a deeply wounded people. The memories of Poland and Yemen, of the gas chamber and of endless wandering, remain raw and bitter. We were betrayed and murdered by a modern and enlightened nation that we had once trusted. We were betrayed by liberals, by Christians, and by former good neighbors who did not care enough when Jewish blood began to flow.

Now that this homeless era is ended, some among us want to return the "favor," to turn our backs on others and on the memory of homelessness itself, just as the world turned its back on us. A bare forty years, after all, have passed since that terrible time, and the survivors of the generation of the wilderness are still very much with us. For these Jews, who include Begin, Shamir, and Sharon as well as Kahane, the message of Jewish suffering and especially of the holocaust, is that of Jewish uniqueness and isolation. We are, in Scripture's words, "a people that dwells alone." There is no universal moral in our tale, nothing in our experience to be shared. "Look out for your own!" is the final message of these last two millennia of Jewish suffering and survival.

BUT LET us make no mistake. We are being tested. Call it a test of God or of history, whichever you like—the outcome is the same. Each rock thrown and each shot fired on the West Bank and in Gaza bears with it a

question that goes right to our heart: are we willing to admit that those who throw the rocks and fire the shots are homeless as we once were? Is our legacy of homelessness something we are willing to have influence our relations with others, or will it continue to insulate, and ultimately isolate, us from the rest of the human community?

IT IS not the purpose of this writing to suggest a particular political settlement to the Palestinian question. That is the task of political leaders, not theologians, and belongs rightly to Israel, not to Jews living in the safety of the Western diaspora. Both the Palestinians and their Arab kinfolk have made the problem infinitely more difficult than it had to be. The PLO gives no sign of readiness for unity even with other Arabs, let alone with us. I do not pretend to know how to act toward such an enemy. I know only that we stand before a test, one that demands that we do all in our power to seek a solution that will be born of compassion, of shared humanity, and of the shared legacy of homelessness. The compassion and magnanimity with which we approach the reality of Palestinian homelessness is the touchstone by which the world will know whether we seek to retain a claim on moral leadership or whether we are turned entirely in on ourselves. Until we have leaders who can articulate such a solution, the question that faces us will continue to eat away at our heart, with each rock thrown, with each bullet fired.

HOW LONG IS FOREVER?

By Norman Gordon

ONE Rosh Hashanah
As the world was being reborn
I returned to sit alone
In the decayed darkness
Of an abandoned *shul*
Surrounded by memories
Of my *bar mitzvah*
Outside kosher restaurants
Turned to pawn shops
Shuls block by block
Silent as graves
Boarded up bakeries
With *chalet*'s memories
The Hebrew school next door
A vacant lot
Filled with time trash
Broken beer bottles

And a gutted Chevy
All around me
Stained glass windows
Smashed
Into bleak surrealistic abstractions
And the names on every wall
The lonely names
The names of blessed memory
Dissolving
In their rusting steel sockets
Set in place forever
They thought
This was America
But how long is forever
For a Jew
Even in America

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