

PROGRAMMING AROUND ISRAEL*

by GRAENUM BERGER

Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, New York, N. Y.

THE story of Israel is apparently so well-known to a Jewish professional audience, that it would be better if we just got down to working on specific programs around the theme of "Israel" for our Jewish Centers rather than explore the subject once again historically and impressionistically.

Yet, as one, who during the past year enjoyed the enviable experience of spending some five weeks in Israel and seeing a good part of the country and many of its institutions and people at close range, even if I do not intend to write a travelogue or novel, one can be forgiven a detailing of some of the things that make programming for Israel in these parlous times, something more than an insistent emergency, but an experience that can be deeply and lastingly rewarding, intellectually and emotionally, to all Jews, and particularly to the youth of our Centers.

Prior to 1948, our interest in Israel always had to be keyed to a shrill pitch, because the country had not only to be colonized and subjugated agriculturally and industrially, but it also had to be wrested politically and militarily to as-

sure a permanent basis. This was a time when you had to be one of the infinite varieties of Zionist. Even if you were only a non-Zionist, you took a kind of secret philanthropic pride in helping Jews find a homelike refuge. The subject was debated in our Center halls and communities. There were bitter partisan alignments. The imperative need, the historical demand and the heroism that was required for settling, attracted East and West European Jews in large numbers and even Jews from the Western world, including the United States. It was often the alert, the adventurous, the imaginative, the dedicated, the zealots who wanted to build a new, normal world for the Jews, not only in Israel, but for the world of Jewry, who might ultimately find their way to this hard-bitten, eroded, treeless Palestine. This was indeed a period of strident, nourishing propaganda, and even the most resistant fell willing victims of this approach through song, through art, through drama, through literature, through pictorial aids.

As Herbert J. Gans has said in his article "American Jewry—Present and Future" (Commentary-May 1956) "Imported Israeli religious objects, jewelry, movies, and especially Israeli songs and

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Jewish Center Workers, St. Louis, Mo., May 29, 1956.

dances have become (for American Jews) vicarious symbols for a sometimes joyful, pioneering, and — most important — youthful Judaism."

The State was established as if by a Hasmonean miracle. Even the fantastic efforts of Jews who tried to move the mountain in Chelm, no longer seemed a quaint, absurd folk tale. What is a mere mountain as compared to the more formidable, unassailable barriers set up by men of the United Nations, statesmen of our own United States, the feudalistic hordes comprising the Arab world. I recall that superbly fitting Hasidic tale which pithily illustrates this undaunted naive heroism, which stubbornly disregards insuperable odds. The tale begins:

"It is told that dangerous plots against the Jews were brewing in the Emperor's palace. So Rabbi Shmelke and his ever faithful disciple Moishe Leib of Sasov set out for Vienna to put an end to such plans."...

That is all. Two men against the Emperor. TWO JEWS AGAINST THE OMNIPOTENT WORLD.

We then entered a period of mass immigration, with demands for enormous and sustained economic support, which involved not only unparalleled philanthropic generosity, but investment as well.

Since 1948, there has been an influx of over 800,000 Jewish people most of them ethnically different. The old settlers, possessed fiery zeal and a rich educational background, and were motivated by high ethical objectives. The recent comers are mostly oriental Jews, forced to move out of their North African or Near Eastern homelands, who lacked every qualification for pioneering on the soil, who were deficient in education, who had suffered from deprivation so long that they had become veritable dependents.

They now constitute 50 per cent of the

population. Despite this unprecedented immigration and attendant problems, and surrounded by hostile neighbors, who have never permitted a peaceful exploitation of this tiny country, in its almost undefendable borders, this land of our forefathers has developed an amazing economy, has wrested cotton and crops from the desert, has produced an effective industry, has exploited its natural resources, and hopefully will find oil in abundance, has built up an unusual number of educational, social welfare and medical services, the likes of which the world has never seen, and is attaining successful results in training and even re-educating the recent immigrant.

When you go to Israel and you see a hospital, or a University building, or a children's training school, you are overwhelmed with the contribution of American, Canadian, South African and Jews from all parts of the world. This second and transitional period is about over. Israelis have dug in.

The time has come for the third stage of Israel's development—building permanently—and this means that for us Americans developing a permanent relationship with Israel. Some of us will continue to be in conflict as to whether we are living in Galut or not. Some of us will only identify ourselves with Israel philanthropically, giving it far less than the ancient tithe, but, nonetheless grudgingly contribute towards its maintenance. Some of us will visit it from time to time, as we make a succession of grand tours around the world, since money is abundant or can be borrowed at convenient rates of interest from banks. While some of us who are professionals will weave into the fabric of our educational programs those elements which will even more strongly bind Israel with America.

Jewish Center workers are primarily concerned with developing the American Jew. Growth involves identification with the Jewish group; and such belongingness, if it is to be more than superficially symbolic, requires some knowledge of one's own people. But study in itself, for its own sake, can be a sterile exercise. It is participation in activities with other people, an important aspect of group living, which challenges the imagination, that gives one a sense of satisfaction and insures a sense of responsibility towards the larger community, whether it be America and the world. This is what will forge bonds with Israel, bonds that pay off in a different quality of human interest. This is what Philip Goodman refers to in his helpful volume "Bound in Fellowship" "Kol Yisroel Chaverim."

Even if one wanted to write Israel off the map or from one's mind, one could not. It is here to stay. And political facts are stubborn reminders even for those with closed hearts, minds and pocketbooks. Israel is important, not only because of its stark existence, but also because of its historical relationship to the Jewish people. Even an uneducated tourist, looking off to Ramat Rachel, or peering down into Abraham's ancient well at Beersheba, or baking in the salted heat of Sedom, "Burnt by the fire sent down by the Lord," or picking up a 2800 year old piece of broken pottery at Megiddo, or respectfully touching the tomb of Maimonides at Tiberias, or bathing in the waters of the Jordan as it flows into Lake Kinneret, or reciting the "Lamentations" of Jeremiah with the rocking Yemenites on the floor of the synagogue on Har Zion on Tish'ah, is profoundly aware that he is on consecrated ground.

But Israel is more than a historical monument—in fact its historical monuments are quite often shabby in contrast

to the emphasis which is placed on the here and now, the shining new white villages, pitched on the mountain corridors overlooking blooming terraces, the magnificent Shikunim which rival our own public housing projects, the new modern designed, three-depth swimming pool at Hadassim, a children's village, or the superb old age home, with every apartment leading out on a garden at Holon, or the ultra-modern green tinted, windowed Histadrut building in Tel Aviv, or the small fleet of ships anchored in Haifa Harbor with their bearded Jewish sailors.

These new facilities are indeed symbols of man's constant struggle for survival, for freedom and for self-determination, and a political state is the only reasonable guarantee of its enduring permanency. Jews, *qua* Jews, now have a place in this world, a homeland, and the status and privacy which goes with owning your own home. Israel came to settle peacefully, but it had to fight stubbornly to hold on to its tiny patch of earth. It did not come to exploit people or destroy cities as many previous conquerors of this hallowed land. By emphasizing the nobility of hard, sweaty toil, and making a religion of Avodah, it has fertilized a long dormant, desert wasteland. It is a catalytic to the whole backward Near East, through its land reclamation, its husbanding and transportation of drops of water, by employing every ounce of intelligence and science to fructify the somewhat less than abundant natural resources.

When you view the reclaimed marshes in Italy or Greece, which gave new life and land to impoverished populations, after removing the deadly, malaria bearing insects, you applaud, but these countries were large, relatively stable, historically rooted and were able to attract the assistance of substantial foreign capital. But when you see what

was performed in the Huleh region with almost bare Jewish hands, where years were spent not only in netting oneself from mosquitoes, but from omnipresent hostile firearms, you can only call it breath-taking.

Israel has demonstrated once again the value of the small group in a world of great powers. Not numbers, but strength of will, life-fulfilling goals, "Conquest of the Desert" have become the modern moral equivalents of our ancient prophets.

That is why little Israel is front-page news every day of the week and as a consequence its culture and civilization will have an impact on the world and particularly on world and American Jewry.

For America and for Jews, there is a strong similarity between these democratic bastions, which even in the present confused and recurring crisis in the Near East leads me to affirm that there is an identity of interests. When one visits the outpost *kvutza*, one can only be reminded of our own American pioneers who pushed out to the frontiers of the west and north and south in search for a new freedom and a new vigor. They were farmers and they were traders and they were also soldiers, who permitted those behind the frontiers to dig in and establish a civilized land. Men and women are equal in Israel, and the prominent role that women play in the Knesset, in the settlements, in industry, in the universities, in social welfare, in the army, gives one a sense of closeness with the parallel sex equality established in American institutions.

The organized worker in Israel holds his head high, just as powerful unions have permitted American labor to rise above easy exploitation in our own industries and commercial enterprises.

Although there is supposed to be an anti-intellectual atmosphere in America,

no one could have read the report of the captains of American industry sitting humbly before the speculative observations of the top scientists from the California Institute of Technology last week, listening to their projections of what our new civilization would be like in the 21st Century, without applauding how high is the real respect for and status of brains and science in America. And so it is in Israel. I was intrigued to meet with outstanding engineers from America and New Zealand, who went halfway around the world to visit with several scientists at the Weizmann Institute last summer, in order to learn something about sewage disposal, a mundane, but an immensely important problem with the growth of population and the control of disease. Brains are a treasured commodity in Israel—in consonance with Jewish tradition.

The collective farms are too well known to describe. The cooperative housing projects match ours in utility, if not in elegance, while when it comes to cooperative health programs, they are far ahead of our still feeble efforts to deal with this vital human need.

As to their social services, although they have learned much from us in the way of physical organization, equipment and even method of operation, one cannot help but be impressed with the vast network of social services which have been developed so quickly. As I told an audience in Tel Aviv, that was welcoming our Workshop group, rather than send more of our workers to Israel, I would have liked to have stolen a dozen or more Israelis for service—not training—in American Jewish social welfare institutions.

I have but to mention the complexities of their population, like America, drawn from the far corners of the world, and how it has been possible to develop a high degree of harmonization and

inter-mingling of diversified immigrants, despite language, religious and seemingly impassable color barriers. They have not mastered the problem, but there is an honest, every day, uncompromising attack on desegregation, and no bigot could survive who advocated openly or even covertly any other position. This is so despite the fact that the newcomer is not educationally the equal of the earlier settlers, is less willing to endure life in the agricultural settlements and prefers the greater opportunities and the relative lustier ease of the large cities, and despite the fact that he is more prone to personal and social breakdown and constitutes statistically the greatest number of real and potential problems and is the heaviest drain on the resources of the new community. Compare it with our own deferred, inadequate actual shabby treatment of the Negro, the Mexican, the Chinese or the recent Puerto Rican.

In Israel, universal compulsory education has been established only for the elementary school age child, and hopefully some day it will be a reality for the secondary age group. This constitutes a serious problem for teen-agers, and is one of the urgent reasons for more YMHAs and social welfare services.

There has been a revival in Hebrew, as a living language, although everyone you meet speaks other tongues, Yiddish, French, Spanish, and the ubiquitous English, and there has been an unexampled promotion of the arts with people queued up for the opera, symphonies and chamber music, the theatre, the dance, the fine and plastic arts—with art colonies, rivaling our own Greenwich village at Safed and Ein Harod. Bezalel and the numerous independent little studios and exhibition halls are filled with original Israeli creations.

We have close ties with Israel, because of relatives and friends, who welcome

you with an ardour and eager hospitality, which is ruinous to their sub-par budgets.

Israel, for those of us who are "universal" rather than primarily Jewish minded, is also the native home of the other two great religious groups, and if you had the same experience as I did of traveling about with ten Protestant professors of Christian theology, you would have witnessed their own expressed feeling of at-homeness in this revived, ancient land. The sun-drenched deserts and the pink-purple tinted mountains exert a terrific pull on every man.

But all is not rosy in that land, and I do not for one moment want to leave the impression that they can live on their own resources as yet, for they just do not have enough to go it alone. Even if they attain a measure of self-sufficiency, we ought to seek out constant ways and means of making the country richer and stronger.

Take an institution close to our own hearts, the YM-YWHA. Born of the prophetic labors of Louis Kraft, only five years old, situated in the heart of Jerusalem on Rehov Hillel, in a building formerly used as an Arab insane asylum, it has been trying desperately to establish itself in facilities which are inadequate and with hand to mouth maintenance funds. I can only compare the facility to a run down extension center in greater New York. When I sought it out, I found that it was closed, and that there was no intent of reopening it because funds had run out.

Walk through the streets of Jerusalem, witness the hundreds and thousands of youth with time hanging heavy on their hands due to insufficient youth services, who would be heading for trouble in almost any other country of the world, but here are ready to respond to a helpful hand, not only for recrea-

tional and social purposes, but for educational and vocational training as well.

In what country do you see young people thronging into the Knesset in their leisure to listen to routine speeches? Where except in totalitarian countries, under the whip-lash of political commissars, would you see nearly 2000 young people attending a political rally, or hundreds listening eagerly and debating with impassioned speakers in the hectic nights just before the election of July 1955? This is youth in Israel.

It is they who built and kept open the "Road of Valour" between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and inscribed on the monument near Kvutzat Hulda that immortal phrase "If I Forget Thee O Jerusalem, Let My Right Hand Forget Its Cunning" or who incised into the stone shaft near Negba, the gateway to the south, "When You Go Down to the Negev, Remember Us."

But they need Y's, which are not dominated by political parties, by the military, or even a Bet Hanoar which is not a masque for special religious indoctrination. They need centers which are as free and untrammelled as those we find in America.

I am glad I went there, and that I have had some small part in reviving interest in the Jerusalem "Y" and in having it re-opened during the coming year. I want to thank those of my colleagues for having responded to the appeal for funds, but I must be frank to say that \$5,500 from all of our American Centers to date for this "Y" is something that one should only whisper.

Our trouble in the States is that we want our youth to be educated to give to this institution, but I am afraid that if we have to depend on pallid educational promptings alone that the doors of the Hillel Street building will be closed down for good.

Go to Israel and see what Hadassah,

what Mizrahi, what B'nai B'rith and countless other Jewish organizations of America have done. We had done nothing in a particularized way. We need not only to support this little building, which requires a mere \$10,000 per year, but we should also be establishing similar Centers, our unique American creation, in every other city—Tel Aviv, Haifa, Ashkelon, etc. More than that we should not be content with rented facilities in dilapidated second-hand structures, but we should be rearing model institutions with every facility. Pride alone should force us to do this. The most magnificent structure in all of Israel is the Young Men's Christian Association with its sky-reaching Jesus Tower dominating the landscape of Jerusalem.

Beyond supporting this institution, all of us ought to make at least one pilgrimage, in order to gain nourishment for our personal and professional selves, and for the people and communities we are serving. But even that is not enough. We ought to encourage our staffs, our board people, our membership to do the same so that on their return we can emphasize Center work in Israel, exploiting them for lectures, for leadership and for fund-raising.

Finally, we ought to be sending our own selected young people from the High School through the Young Adult years to Israel. There are more than 100,000 such young people registered in our institutions, but I did not find them amongst the hundreds and hundreds of young people who were in Israel last summer for workshops, for study *Tiyulim*, for work service in the settlements. What a feat it would be to send such a group next summer, and I am sure that we could get assistance from the Jewish Agency for such purposes, and on their return have them attend the National Jewish Welfare Board

sponsored Youth conference in a body in the fall. They could give of their new found knowledge, enthusiasm and inspiration to the other youth gathered from all sections of this country. Other Jewish youth organizations of America are doing this. Why not our Centers?

Israel is here to stay. It is not in conflict with our American citizenship

and loyalties. It is not in conflict with our individual religious and political principles. It is an indivisible part of Jewish life. It may become the most important factor in the future development of the Jew in this world not rivaling but complementing the American Jewish community. *Let us use Israel Programmatically.*