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I Know It's Not Racism, But What Is It?

by MICHAEL H. DAVIS

My memories are so dim, I don't know whether what I remember is the event itself or the frequent amused retelling of it by my mother. But on May 14, 1948, when I was two years old, the mailman came to my family's door in our small Massachusetts town in which we were the only Jews.

"Well," he said, handing the mail to my mother, "I guess you'll be moving soon."

"No," answered my mother, lowering her eyebrows

as she stared at his face, "we're not moving. Why would we move? We've only been here a short time."

"But, Mrs. Davis," he asked my mother, "haven't you heard the news?"

Wordless, her frown only grew.

"The Jews," he announced. "You Jews." He hesitated. "Israel has been declared," he shouted, as if it were war, which, unfortunately, was soon to have some truth to it. He then added, seeing my mother's lips curl into a silent smile, "You have a country now."

The smile disappeared. "This," my mother said emphatically, pausing, "is my country." And she disap-

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peared back into the house.

I grew up in the midst of Korea and in the shadow of World War II. When I was seven, I had to relearn the Pledge of Allegiance because President Eisenhower, we were told, had added the phrase "under God," between "one country" and "with liberty and justice for all." When I was eight I celebrated with my young friends the fact that for every one American prisoner returned to us, we sent back a thousand North Koreans. The arithmetic made us proud to be Americans.

That patriotism was shattered in the anti-war riots of the sixties. Since then I have sheltered my family from flags, guns, and even pledges of allegiance, for which, it pleases me to say, my children stand unwillingly and whisper alternative statements of their own. Despite my mother's fierce Americanism — America did, after all, welcome both my father's and her refugee families with material and cultural wealth beyond their imaginations, and bequeathed that heritage to me and my children — I am deeply suspicious of patriotism and nationalisms of all kinds. I would be deeply disturbed, even furious, to see my children captured by the kind of blind passion which, it still appears to me, invited the disillusioning tragedy of Vietnam.

My children, however, are Zionists, and I could not be more proud. What is it about Zionism which doesn't, for me at least, trigger the same suspicions? My children, who have traveled through Europe and seen the muted national feelings prevalent there now, return to the U.S. and giggle when they see American flags in front of the neighborhood houses. They offer sharp comments when the nightly news is transmitted from the White House. But their feelings towards Israel and their felt duties as American Jews are untinged by that cynicism. And I am unashamed.

These children who say their own pledges, who are as suspicious as I am of official Washington, and who laugh at what seem to be unnecessary patriotic displays, acted quite differently when we stood on the shores of the Mediterranean in Tel Aviv last summer. Two F-4 Phantoms flew quite low, and my three sons, pointing at the jet, shouted and screamed together, "Dad!" And then suddenly, to follow the coast north to Haifa, the planes rolled to the right, lowering their wings just enough for my three boys to see their blue shields of David. "Look, dad," my boys continued, very slowly, in almost a whisper. "They're ours." We hugged, and I cried, a bit confused.

For us, at least, Zionism is not simply nationalism nor patriotism. (And, considering the order of forbidden sentiments in my family, nurtured in the sixties, it is laughable to suggest that it is racism.) There is something more which makes it good, acceptable, inspiring and positive. I am not unaware of the historical debates concerning the nature of Zionism

and its character as a national movement but, for me, there is a huge difference between a national movement and simple nationalism. I think my recognition of this difference has to do with something else that came out of the sixties. During the sixties, so-called patriots sported bumper stickers which read, "America, Love It or Leave It." Patriotism can descend to such sentiments. But Zionism is reflected in the buttons my children sometime wear, carrying the same blue shield of David and the simple legend, "Let's Go Home."

The Law of Return is so essential to Zionism that a Zionist could never say "Israel, Love It Or Leave It." Perhaps "Israel, Love It And Rebuild It," but no more than that. A Zionism that does not positively seek Jewish immigration is not Zionism. It is the active and purposeful mission of Zionism, including but not limited to the unselfish offering of a much-needed homeland, which distinguishes, for me, Zionism from nationalism or patriotism. Zionism is neither blind patriotism nor nationalism because it has an inherently positive and heuristic component. It is nationalism with a purpose and it seems meaningless to consider Zionism without that purpose. Zionism is, by definition, active, not passive; it is not something that can simply be believed because, as the rebuilding of our nation, it requires action. One cannot be simply patriotic about Israel to be a Zionist, one has to do something. A Zionist can wave a flag, and proudly, but flag-waving does not constitute Zionism.

The mission of Israel, to be the homeland to the Jews, to offer them refuge from abuse and shelter from discrimination, is far different, it seems to me, from the patriotic memories which forced the smile from my mother's face. The facts that our family had found a home in America and that the American armies had helped save the world from fascism, were proud historical facts, but they were, after all, history. America's past deeds did not prevent what was to come in the sixties. A patriotism founded on simple national identity was not enough to save me and most of my friends from profound disillusionment nor our opponents from crass jingoism. Patriotism and nationalism, without more, are not enough to justify what they frequently demand, and so I reject them. Zionism, however, is neither, and I embrace it for myself and for my children. ■