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## ISRAEL

This summer I read a fascinating book that is much deeper than it appears at face value. The book is “The Yiddish Policeman’s Union” by noted novelist Michael Chabon (“Shay-bon”). Chabon had previously won the Pulitzer Prize for “The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay.” “Kavalier and Clay” was a fictionalized tale of the golden age of comic books in the United States. There was a strong Jewish undercurrent in its story line. This is to be expected considering that some of the earliest inventors of our most enduring comic book legends, such as Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, creators of Superman, were Jewish.

“The Yiddish Policeman’s Union,” which presents as a police detective-murder mystery novel, is steeped in Jewish culture, custom, law, and lore. While I imagine that someone who is not Jewish or not familiar with Jewish issues can enjoy it as a police novel, they will miss much of its richness and darker undertones.

The story is set in a culture and society that is jarring to modern Jewish sensibilities. In “The Yiddish Policeman’s Union” the brave Jews of Palestine who fought to establish the State of Israel in 1948 were overwhelmed by the Arab forces, lost the battle, and were driven into the sea. Those who survived, as well as the Jews of Europe who survived the Holocaust, had nowhere to go. The United State’s Congress reluctantly created the Federal District of Sitka in Alaska and gave it to the Jewish exiles as a homeland. The U.S. Congress allowed them to establish their own government and institutions in Sitka. *Yiddish* was instituted as the local language, as opposed to “American” which was spoken in the United States. Chabon makes sly use of *Yiddish* in his tale. A gun, for example, is a *scholem*, or it might have called in the old west, a “peace maker.”

But, alas, the District of Sitka was only a temporary solution to the Jewish problem. As the book opens, sovereignty over Sitka is going to soon pass from the Jews back to the state of Alaska. As “Reversion” looms ahead, the Jews of Sitka ponder whether they will be able to receive the legal papers which will allow them to stay or where they will go once they are homeless again.

When Judy and I were in Israel earlier this summer before I read the novel I read a critique of “The Yiddish Policeman’s Union” in the Jerusalem Post. In his opinion piece Samuel Freedman wrote: “One of the running gags of the novel is the absurdity of *shtetl* life transplanted into Alaska. Yiddish-language newspapers, Slivovitz toasts, a hotel named for Einstein and a street for Nordau - all are meant to laughably underscore how inorganic, how extrinsic Jews are to this land. The unspoken inference

is that it is just as unnatural for Jews to have plopped themselves down in a Middle Eastern desert. And when Chabon refers to the Sitka Jews having pushed out the indigenous Tlingit Indians, his metaphor needs no footnote to be understood.”

Freedman points out that Chabon’s wife, novelist Ayelet Waldman, is staunchly anti-Israel and anti-Zionist and that Chabon must share her positions. He writes that Chabon negates the idea of a Jewish homeland and romanticizes landlessness and wandering. The villains of the story are *Verbovers*, fictitious corrupt Chassidic Jews whose fantasy is to perform a terrorist act. They scheme to blow up the Dome of the Rock and El Aqsa mosque on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount and hasten the advent of the Messiah.

Freedman says that Chabon is similar to Anne Roiphe and Philip Roth in his critique of Israel and her policies. However, he concludes, “Roughly two generations younger, apparently imbued with the belief that Israel is a colonial imperialistic oppressor, Chabon has found joy in, at least on paper, making it cease to exist.” (Jerusalem Post, Samuel Freedman, Opinion, July 13, 2007)

As I have already said, I read Freedman’s opinion piece before I read Chabon’s novel. Admittedly, I dove into it with a chip on my shoulder. I was looking for anti-Israel and anti-Zionist themes, ready to reach the same conclusion as Freedman, that for Chabon establishing a Jewish homeland in the District of Sitka in Alaska is no more absurd than establishing one in the Middle East.

I do not know where Chabon stands on the question of Israel nor do I think it is reasonable or fair to ascribe to him the same opinions as his wife. As one who has been married for many years, I can safely say that husbands and wives don’t always agree on everything!

However, after reading the “Yiddish Policeman’s Union” I reached a completely opposite opinion about the modern State of Israel than Freedman ascribes to Chabon. At the end of the novel I did not feel a warm nostalgia and longing for Jewish homelessness and wandering, nor do I think that Chabon’s characters did either. Instead, I felt anxiety, despair, and insecurity. Although there were no pogroms in Sitka, nor were there guns pointed at its Jews, the Jews still had to leave what had been their home for sixty years and go back into exile. The age old questions were again raised: Where are we to go? Who wants us? How will we start all over again? and: How many more years will go by before we are forced into exile again?

At the end of the novel I was grateful that the Jewish District of Sitka and the upcoming “Reversion” were the figments of a writer’s imagination and not reality. When I finished the novel I offered a prayer of thanksgiving that Jews are homeless no more. We are not in exile nor will we be forced into exile once again. Since 1948 we have had a homeland to call our own: *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, whose sixtieth birthday

we celebrate this year.

In 1948 the Jews of Palestine were not pushed into the sea after the Arab states rejected the U.N. Partition Plan. Instead, after fighting a long and bloody battle, they established the first Jewish State since the before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Jews who could no longer live in Europe after the *Shoah* were welcomed with open arms and found refuge. So, too, were the Jews from Yemen and other Arab lands, and more recently Jews from Ethiopia, the former Soviet Union, and Jews who seek to escape the anti-Semitism of Argentina and France.

At long last the Jewish people not only has a place to go to escape oppression, but it also has a homeland in which Judaism and Jewish culture can flourish once again.

I am unsure whether or not Chabon, as Freedman claims, “uses the absurdity of a Jewish autonomous region in Alaska...to laughably underscore how inorganic, how extrinsic Jews are to *Eretz Yisrael*,” but if he does, it is a perverted analogy. Plopping Jews down in Alaska is illogical and incongruous. What do Jews know of glaciers, dog sledding, caribou and polar bears? *Gornisht!* Jews love air conditioning not igloos!

But *Eretz Yisrael* is not Alaska. Even the name by which we refer to the land points to our centuries old link and association with it. Jews have always called this swatch of land alongside the Mediterranean Ocean *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel; the land, according to the Bible, that was promised by God to *Avraham*, *Yitzchak*, *Ya'akov* and their descendants. This is the land in which the Twelve Tribes of Israel settled, in which our Jewish ancestors lived their lives and built the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Temple, in Jerusalem. While Jews were repeatedly exiled from *Eretz Yisrael*, there were always Jews who managed to live there and there always Jews who made pilgrimages to walk on its holy sand. Throughout the centuries we Jews never lost our memories and connection to the land. We spoke of and prayed for our return to Zion, the rebuilding of the Temple, and for a universal message of peace and God's sovereignty to go forth from Jerusalem.

When Theodore Herzl convened the First Zionist Conference in Basil, Switzerland there was at first some sentiment to establish a Jewish State in Uganda. It did not take much persuading for the Conference to instead endorse the position: “Zionism seeks for the Jewish people a publicly recognized legally secured homeland in Palestine.” The reason is obvious. Jews have a long historical and cultural connection to the land of Israel. Creating a Jewish homeland in Uganda makes about as much sense as placing it in Alaska. But creating a new Jewish State in *Eretz Yisrael* makes perfect sense.

While I have always felt drawn to Israel, I have traveled there more times than I can count, and I feel that it is my second home, this last summer I had revelations

about why Israel is so important to me and other Jews.

The first revelation took place during a *Shabbat* service at Congregation *V'Ahavta*, the *Masorti-Conservativi* congregation in Zichron Ya'akov. Israeli born *Masorti* Rabbi Elisha Wolfin, who was brought up as a secular *Kibbutznik*, was speaking about the transition in leadership that took place before the Children of Israel entered the Promised Land. Moses was soon going to die and he was to appoint Joshua to take his place. Rabbi Wolfin said that it must have very difficult for Moses to entrust his successor with the duties and responsibilities that heretofore had been his. He had to pull back and give Joshua the space not only to forge his own path, but to make his own mistakes. Moses had to let go in order for Joshua to succeed.

The rabbi went on to talk about the current leadership of the State of Israel. Up to now Israeli leaders have been predominantly elder statesman. Some have been in leadership roles since the establishment of the State. Rabbi Wolfin said that it must be difficult for the old guard to pass the baton of leadership on to a younger generation. But it must be done in order for the State to flourish in the years to come. He said that the older generation, just like Moses, must learn to let go, and give the new generation the opportunity to learn, grow, and make its own mistakes.

It was a very nice lesson and a *D'var Torah* that any rabbi could give, no matter where they lived. But here is what struck me about Rabbi Wolfin's words: when he used the weekly *parsha* to make a point about the government of the State of Israel, there was a direct and organic connection between Moses and today's leaders of the Jewish State. That is, all Jews are direct descendants of Moses and the generation that fled Egypt. We are all part of the same continuous narrative. When a rabbi in Israel uses the Bible to talk about the modern State, there is a direct connection between these two far flung generations.

This is not so for rabbis in the United States and elsewhere who may give the same *D'var Torah*. There is no organic, historical, and cultural link between the Torah and other modern governments. When we use the Torah's lesson to teach a lesson about modern life outside of Israel, we are to using a Jewish source to say something about the non Jewish world. But to teach such a lesson is, in a sense, comparing apples to oranges. Why should there even be a suggestion, much less an expectation, that the government of the United States or other countries should conduct themselves according to Biblical precedent or Jewish values?

But when we speak about a life in a Jewish State we do expect that the government will conduct itself not only in consonance with Western democratic values, but with Jewish values as well. The Prime Minister, President, and other governmental leaders in Israel are modern descendants of Moses, the prophets, and the kings of Israel in a very direct way, and they have an obligation to follow in their footsteps.

Which brings me to my second revelation about Israel this summer. During our past visits Judy and I were centered in Jerusalem. While we have not in recent years taken city buses, it is fairly easy to get around Jerusalem on foot or by taxi. We have rented cars but only for short excursions out of the city.

This summer we spent three weeks in the north of Israel, in Zichron Ya'akov. In Zichron Ya'akov an automobile is a must. After our Tifereth Israel tour group returned to San Diego, we rented a car. Although both of us were listed on the rental agreement, Judy refused to drive and for good reason; Israeli drivers are nuts. Far too many Israeli drivers speed or drive recklessly or erratically. While its always a good idea to drive defensively, in Israel one's life depends upon it!

As I drove the highways I found myself fuming whenever a driver sped past me or cut me off. I had a visceral response to the lack of courtesy and the failure to yield or allow one to change lanes. Upon reflection my anger was probably not proportional to the offense. San Diego drivers are far from perfect and often commit the same offenses. But here I am more likely to be slightly annoyed and shrug it off. In Israel I was angry. Why, I asked myself, was I more upset with Israeli than California drivers?

And then it struck me. *Kavod Habriot*, respect for human beings, and *Pikuach Nefesh*, respect for human safety and life, are central tenants of Judaism, and Jewish thought and culture. Someone passing you on a two lane highway at 160 kilometers an hour and then cutting back into your lane so abruptly that it forces you to slam on your brakes is a violation of both *Kavod Habriot* and *Pikuach Nefesh*.

Quite simply, because the majority of them are Jews I have higher expectation of Israeli drivers. As Jews I expect them to conduct themselves in consonance with Jewish traditions and values.

Now I realize, of course, that this is a completely unreasonable and absurd expectation. But I, as well as many others, do have a higher expectations of Israelis because they are part of a religion and culture which celebrates life, abhors injustice, and urges all human beings to walk in Godly ways and recognize the *Tzelem Elohim*, the image of God in themselves and in others around them. When individual Israelis, governmental leaders, or representatives of the society or state violate Jewish principles we often feel that the offense is greater than when committed by those who are not Jewish.

One example: when former Israeli President Moshe Katzav was accused of rape and sexual harassment, the offense was more deeply felt because, not only was he the President of the State of Israel, he is also an Orthodox Jew.

It is not only Israel's drivers that annoy me. There are many other things about Israel that drive me crazy. My irritations go all the way from exasperation with

government policies, to the increasing number of people living in poverty, to my irritation with the lack of sufficient newspaper recycling bins in the cities.

But there is more to my sensitivity to what happens in Israel and to Israelis than my love of Jewish values. I am more emotional about what Israel and Israelis do than others because they are family, and no one can drive you crazy the way members of your own family can. You always have higher expectations of those you love, and no one can annoy, frustrate, and anger you more than the people you care about.

What happens to and in Israel affects me in a very personal way. When Israelis do something stupid, it embarrasses me. I feel their actions reflect on me and all Jews. But on the other hand, when Israel and Israelis do good things, which far and above outnumber the bad things, I am thrilled and proud.

I am a member of the generation that lived through the Six Day War in 1967. I remember the fear we felt when Israel's very survival was at stake when she was threatened and attacked by all the surrounding Arab states. I recall rallying with other Jews in Los Angeles' Hollywood Bowl and calling upon our fellow Americans to support Israel. I, and hundreds of thousands of others, contributed vitally needed funds. I also remember my relief when Israel pushed back its enemies and the Old City of Jerusalem and Temple Mount were once again in our hands.

I was, and continue to be proud, of Israel's will to survive. She is a model of Jewish heroism and courage. She guarantees refuge to Jews who seek escape from persecution, violence, and hatred. Her citizens make countless contributions to the world, from medical discoveries, to computer processors, to the solar electrical generation system that will soon to be installed the Mojave desert.

Unfortunately, most younger Jews do not share my feelings. Their knowledge of and relationship to Israel is far different. They have not lived through the same events and what they know about Israel has often been learned from the biased and negative reports on television and in newspaper articles. They hear the words "apartheid" and "oppressors" and "occupiers" describing Israel and Israelis and barring any knowledge to the contrary, they accept these libelous accusations as fact.

One of my great frustrations as a rabbi and as a Jew is convincing other Jews, especially younger ones, to share my love of Israel. I was excited when Ira Sherbak, our new Torah School Director, told me that in the coming year Israel will be our Torah School's central theme and that our relationship to Israel will be the focus of many of the lessons and activities. Educating our children about Israel's role in the life of the Jewish People and Jewish history is critical. Yet, education can only go so far.

It is one thing to know about Israel, it is quite another to love Israel, the land, the State, and the people. But how can one teach love? Love cannot be taught nor can it

be forced. Love can only be felt, experienced, and lived.

It had been many years since Judy and I had taken a group of our congregants to Israel. Perhaps because of this, I was particularly struck by the effect that seeing the land and the people of Israel had on those who traveled with us. I was struck not only by the surprise and wonder of those who visited, but by their emotions as well. In Israel they saw where our ancestors journeyed, where the Temple stood, and that our people are thriving today.

Their emotional connection was particularly strong at Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust Museum and Memorial. Touring Yad Vashem brought clarity to the role Israel played in providing refuge for the survivors of the Holocaust, in memorializing its victims, and celebrating the resisters of Nazi oppression. Seeing the daily life of Israelis casts a new light on the harsh television images which makes it seem as though Israelis spent all of their waking hours in bomb shelters. Standing at the Conservative Kotel during a Bat Mitzvah, next to the huge stone blocks that the Romans threw off the Temple Mount, brought to life the tragedies of Jewish history and the failure of our enemies to extinguish the Jewish flame. Touring Masada, our travelers recognized and connected with Jewish bravery and heroism in the face of insurmountable odds. Watching the streets of Jerusalem grow silent on Friday afternoon they sensed the true meaning of *Shabbat Shalom*, Sabbath peace. More than one traveler said, "I now know what it is like to live in a Jewish majority, where everyone shares the same history, nationality, and cultural traditions."

I can speak about Israel for hours, and I can employ every hyperbole in the book to tell you how wonderful it is, but the only way for you to fall in love with Israel is for you to visit Israel. Although it is possible to have an affinity and affection for her on some theoretical level without ever going there, it is only when one visits and has personal engagement with the land and her citizens that one begin to form an emotional and spiritual bond.

As you know, I am a strong advocate for programs that send young people to Israel for the summer, such as U.S.Y. Israel Pilgrimage, Camp Ramah Israel Seminar, and the San Diego Scott Stone Mission. I also urge our youth to spend a year of high school or college study there, be it on U.S.Y.'s Nativ, the Conservative Yeshiva, Young Judea's Year Course, Junior Year Abroad programs, and the large number of other opportunities that exist to bring young people to the land. I am glad that so many of our kids have gone, but it is only a small percentage of those who could go.

I am also a big fan of Birthright, or as it is called in Hebrew, *Taglit*. Birthright is an outreach program that takes thousands of college age young adults to Israel each year. They return not only with knowledge and stronger ties to Israel but to Judaism as well.

If you love Israel, one of the most important things you can do to support her is

to encourage your children and grandchildren to visit. You should not only encourage them to participate in one of the many programs that are available, but offer to pay for them as well. What better Bar or Bat Mitzvah gift could there be for a youngster than to give them a fund to be used to travel to Israel when they are in high school or college? Or, you could take them there on a family mission of your own so that everyone shares the experience.

Many have often thought that it would be wonderful if a “Birthright” program existed for Jewish adults, but Birthright is very expensive to run. Participants basically pay only for their own discretionary spending, although the cost of the program per person is around \$2,400. Since its inception well over 200 million dollars has been invested in the program by generous donors and the government of Israel to subsidize more than 123,000 young adults from 51 countries.

With these kinds of costs, it is unlikely that a Birthright program for adults will be established in the near future. Therefore, it is up to every Jew to find the funds necessary to visit Israel at least once in their lifetime on their own. One cannot truly love anyone or anything without forging a personal relationship first. Visiting Israel is a transformative experience. Once you walk the land yourself, you will not feel the same about her again. I am convinced that you will love her as much as I and the tens of thousands of other Jews who have traveled there. I also promise you that when you depart you will leave a piece of yourself there, and that you will hardly be able to wait until the next time you can visit and once again feel spiritually whole and fulfilled as a Jew and as a human being.