

## Recreating a Symbol of Hope

By Rabbi John Friedman

In 2004, a beloved graduate of my religious school came to my study to discuss a problem he was facing at his Ivy League university. Andy had always been a committed supporter of Israel, and his attachment was augmented by an emotional six-week NFTY-in-Israel experience. Now, a few years later and after a college-level Jewish Studies course on Israeli history, Andy was having trouble attending Hillel events.

“Rabbi, they have a big sign over the front door that says, ‘Wherever you stand, you stand with Israel.’ How can I maintain unquestioning support for the occupation of another people, sustained with checkpoints and home demolitions and targeted killings?” Learning about Israel’s long occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, territories conquered during the June 1967 Six-Day War, had significantly diminished Andy’s affection for Israel. Now, he was distancing himself from the Jewish State he had once loved so deeply.

Andy’s transformation is emblematic of other Diaspora Jews. Many of our children are coming home from college having read histories of the State of Israel, and discovering that what they were taught about Israel is only part of the truth; many others simply read the daily news and find they can no longer accept the conventional wisdom with which they were raised.

The Six-Day War catalyzed a landslide of new membership in American synagogues and created an increased sense of Jewish identity; the occupation that followed, however, has gradually led to a diminished number of Jews who consider Israel an important part of that identity. This year, the occupation will reach the 40-year mark – longer by far than the American occupation of Japan or the Allied occupation of Germany. The results have been profound – for Israelis, for the Diaspora, and of course, for Palestinians.

Sadly, the world no longer sees Israel as a beacon of morality in the Middle East. Instead, Israel is widely derided as an imperialist aggressor. Once, Israel was “David” to the Arab “Goliath.” Today, Israel wields the power that oppresses Palestinians. In 1970, Israel could confidently sign UN resolution 242 declaring it unacceptable for a nation to acquire land by military force. Would she sign such a document today?

On May 16th, 2007, Yom Yerushalayim, we celebrated 40 years since the reunification of Jerusalem and Israel’s victory over hostile Arab states. Paradoxically, that day also marked 40 years since the very moment in which loving Israel started to become a challenge for Andy and others like him, 40 years of Israeli occupation of land inhabited largely by Palestinians.

After 40 years, it is time for American Jewry to help Israel, once more, become a symbol of hope to Jews everywhere.

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