Opinion

News



Bishops at their fall general assembly. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Today is the 70th anniversary of the founding of the state of Israel. According to the Jewish calendar, the celebration was marked last month, but in the encyclopedia with its Gregorian calendar that I grew up with, May 14 is the date of Israeli independence.

Israeli independence day is an event to celebrate. In a part of the world where democracy remains rare, where courts and the press are no more independent than they are in Putin's Russia, and where human rights are honored more in the breach than not, Israel is an exception. It is for this reason, not for reasons of geopolitical strategy, that the U.S. and Israel are natural allies. We are bound by our common commitment to democratic norms and Enlightenment values of justice and equality. Yes, we both fall short of those ideals, and of course Israeli democracy differs from our own because of the circumstance that she is surrounded by hostile neighbors. Nonetheless, our alliance is built on shared ideals not only shared interests.

King Abdullah II of Jordan seems like a fine fellow, and he is an ally, but he was not elected to his post. Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi won a kind of election, the kind where the winner gets 99 percent of the vote. The West hopes Mohammed bin Salman proves to be the type of reformer Saudi Arabia needs, and perhaps he will, but he is a prince accountable to no one. While I am no fan of Israel Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, he can be thrown out of office today by a free vote of a parliament elected in a free vote of the people.

Somewhere in Gaza today, a Palestinian Arab is arrested for a crime. Somewhere in Syria today, a Syrian is arrested for a crime. Somewhere in Israel today, an Israeli Arab will be arrested for a crime. Which of the three has a right to counsel and can expect a fair trial before an independent judiciary? There is an Arab sitting on the Supreme Court of Israel. Can you conceive of the reverse?

Yet, in certain circles of the left, there is a reluctance to celebrate Israeli independence, and a hostility to our sister democracy that is difficult to explain. Even here at NCR, we see a reference this anniversary as the "Nakba" or "catastrophe" because of its consequences for the Palestinian people. Which is it? A catastrophe or a cause of celebration?

After a war, there is almost always a relocation of populations. In World War II, Poland shifted to the West, losing territories to the Soviet Union while taking territory in Silesia and East Prussia that had been part of the German Reich. My Polish grandmother was from the town of Grodnov, which is now in Belarus, not Poland. Millions of people were moved forcibly by the Red Army as Stalin sought a deeper barrier on his Western front. I should say: Despite the violence of the relocations, Stalin had some justification in seeking a stronger barrier given his country's history of being invaded and brutalized from the West.

In 1948, Israel accepted the partition plan adopted by the United Nations the previous year. The Arab nations rejected it and attacked Israel when the British mandate ended. They lost and when the fighting ended, Israel controlled more territory than it had been awarded by the partition plan. Mindful of the hostility of her neighbors, Israel wisely held on to the additional land. This resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinian Arabs, although many decided to stay.

That hostility also resulted in the displacement of tens of thousands of Jews. A few years back, at a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Council, a resolution was introduced charging the Israeli government with apartheid. Hillel Neuer, director of United Nations Watch, an NGO based in Geneva, Switzerland,* exposed the moral fraudulence of the countries attacking Israel but it was his final point that most warrants our attention today. He noted that the Middle East was once full of Jews but is no longer. "Algeria once had 140,000 Jews," Neuer stated. "Algeria, where are your Jews?" Egypt had 75,000 Jews. "Egypt, where are your Jews?" Those concerned about the so-called "catastrophe" that befell the Palestinians who fled their homes in the wake of the 1948 war must ask and answer these questions also.

What has happened in the land of Israel since 1948 astonishes. Its efforts to manage its limited water supply have produced solutions that will help the entire planet cope with the mounting crisis of water on account of climate change. They are a hub of innovation in the tech industry, rivaling Silicon Valley in the number of successful startups. In terms of culture, Israel is firmly a part of the West, with a hodgepodge of cultural manifestations that make Tel Aviv more akin to New York or Berlin than to other capitals in the region: Just check out the culture pages of Haaretz. And, you will not likely find gay men and women holding hands in the streets of Nablus, or Damascus, or Riyadh anytime soon, for fear of arrest of worse, but Israel extends all civil rights to its LGBT community, and friends tell me that Gay Pride in Tel Aviv

rivals D.C. or New York. (Nothing rivals San Francisco!)

More than any of those accomplishments, in the 20th century, the Jewish people achieved something that had been unknown in human history: They brought a dead language back to life. Hebrew, confined for centuries to liturgical and scholarly usage, is again a conversational tongue. It would be like Western Europe resurrecting Latin. It is an achievement that is beyond remarkable. And, had there been no Israel, it would not have happened.

With all this to celebrate, why then is there such hostility to Israel? Why does the ongoing conflict with the Arabs produce no sympathy for the Jews, even when the so-called moderate Arabs like Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas display an "Elders of Zion" degree of Jew-hatred? Why does no one hold the Arab nations, and especially the Palestinians, responsible for their lack of a developed political culture? Why has this anti-Jewish hostility emerged on the political left of the West? Why was the Anti-Defamation League, which trains people to infiltrate white supremacist groups, removed from the Starbucks anti-bias training program after the ugly, racist incident in Philadelphia? Most chillingly, why has anti-Semitism found a home in the religious left?

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I do not know the answers to these questions. I want to believe it has nothing to do with the historic tug of anti-Semitism in Western culture. But, what, then is the reason? Are the Jews to always live under a double standard?

Liberal Catholics, both as liberals and as Catholics, should abhor this anti-Israeli attitude. As liberals, because Israeli society is itself liberal, and as Catholics because our relationship to Jews is unique, they alone are to us as elder brothers, they alone first recognized the God we worship and produced the savior we confess. And, the evil treatment of Jews by Christians through the centuries makes it an obligation to acknowledge there is a moral authority to Zionism.

At least today, and for the past seventy years, the Jews may live under a double standard before the world, but in Israel they live in a country they can call their own, where they can defend themselves as they could not do through the centuries of exile, where they can follow the faith of their fathers and mothers, or follow no faith

at all, as is their right, where they need not worry about the knock at the door and can die in their own beds. And that is a thing to celebrate.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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* *This article has been updated with the correct title and position of Hillel Neuer.*