ISRAEL

AN *Atlantic* SUPPLEMENT

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THE ATLANTIC



THE KINGDOM OF THE SPIRIT

BY **DAVID BEN-GURION**

In this, the Bar Mitzvah year, signalizing the coming of age of Israel, it seems fitting to make an assessment of the young and enterprising democracy. We turn first to its elder statesman, DAVID BEN-GURION, *who has been Prime Minister of the republic of Israel during eleven of its thirteen years of existence.*

THE Jewish people are not only a national and political unit. Since their first appearance on the stage of history they have been the personification of a moral will and the bearers of a historic vision which they inherited from the prophets of Israel. It is impossible to understand the history of the Jewish people and their struggle for existence — both when they were a nation rooted in their own soil and more or less controlling their own destiny, and when they were a wandering people, exiled and dispersed — unless we bear in mind the unique idea which their history embodies, and the stubborn opposition, not only physical, political, and military, but also spiritual, moral, and intellectual, which the Jews have always confronted.

In ancient times, our most important neighbors were Egypt and Babylon. The struggle with these mighty neighbors was political and military as well as cultural and spiritual. Israel's prophets spoke out against the spiritual influence of these neighbors on Israel's religio-moral concepts and social patterns. They advocated faith in one God, the unity of the human race, and the dominion of justice. Today, the Jewish people, having held their own, appear again in the same area in which they evolved. The entire environment in this region has been completely transformed since Bible days. The languages, religions, civilizations, and the very names of the ancient Middle Eastern peoples have disappeared. Yet Israel, though largely uprooted for two millenniums, continues its ancient traditions of language, faith, and culture — as it were, uninterruptedly.

Little is known about the history of our people during the period of the Persian rule. The Hellenistic era initiated by the conquest of the East by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. led to a desperate struggle between Judaism and the superb Hellenistic culture. The struggle was not only that of a downtrodden people fighting foreign oppressors. In the main, it was a cultural contest of great drama between two unique peoples utterly at variance in material, political, and philosophical terms, but alike in spiritual grandeur.

The Jewish people's most difficult test came, however, after the birth of Christianity. Unlike the cultures of Egypt and Babylon, Greece and Rome, Christianity was not foreign to Judaism. It stemmed from the Jewish people; its inspiration was from a Jew whose ideas belonged within the framework of the Jewish concepts of his day. The new faith was given its direction away from Judaism by Saul of Tarsus. Called Paul, he was the son of a Jewish citizen of Rome living in Syria. He was brought up in the spirit of Judaism and was a zealous Pharisee, but as a Diaspora Jew he had absorbed something of Hellenistic culture. Once a fanatical opponent of the Christians, he "saw the light," came to believe in Jesus as the Son of God, and gave new direction to the sect.

Woodcut by Jacob Pins.

His mission, he believed, was to the Gentiles, and he created a church opposed to Judaism. In the name of Jesus, we find it said, "I am not come to destroy [the law] but to fulfill." Paul, however, was determined to root out the law.

About five hundred years after the defeat of Bar Kochba in 135 A.D., the land of Israel was conquered by the Arabs. Unlike most of the preceding conquerors, these invaders were not merely a military force; they were armed with a new faith, Islam. This religion, though not an outgrowth of the land of Israel, showed clear signs of Jewish influence. The conquests of Mohammed and his disciples were more rapid and remarkable than those of Christianity. All the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa succumbed to the new religion. Only the Jewish people withstood it.

A NEW ideological trend against the Jewish people's survival arose with the great revolutions of modern times, in France and Russia. The French Revolution, inspired by "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité,*" had powerful effects throughout Europe: it undermined monarchy and feudalism; it gave the Jews the first impetus to emancipation and equality of rights. But this revolution demanded of Jewry the obliteration of its national character. Many Western Jews willingly succumbed, and an assimilationist movement arose which threatened to overwhelm the Jewish people.

The Jewish historic will withstood even this powerful challenge. Emancipation instead led to new expressions of its national character and Messianic yearnings. Much of Jewry divested itself of its theocratic garb and adopted a secular outlook, but its attachment to its historic origins and its homeland became stronger; its ancient language awoke to new life; a secular Hebrew literature was created; and there arose the movements of *Chibbat Zion* ("Love of Zion") and Zionism. The emancipation which came from without was transformed into self-emancipation — a movement of liberation from the bonds of dependence on others and life in foreign lands — and the first foundations were laid for the resuscitation of the national independence in the ancient homeland.

Like the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution also aroused — and continues to arouse — repercussions throughout the world. Once again the Jewish people were confronted with an ideological struggle and a historic test, no less grave and difficult than all those that had gone before.

In 1917 the Balfour Declaration was issued; for the first time since the Destruction of the Temple, the Jews were recognized by a world power as a separate nation, and they were promised the right to return to their land. The League of Nations, established at the end of World War I, gave international confirmation to the Balfour Declaration and recognized the historic connection of the Jewish people with their ancient homeland.

In the same year, the Bolshevik Party gained power in Russia, and the new regime, which promised redemption to the world, dealt a grievous blow to the Jewish people: Russian Jewry, the largest and most vital Jewish community in the world, was forcibly cut off from the rest of the Jewish people and their renascent homeland.

But for some time after the Bolshevik regime had attained absolute power, Russian Jewry contributed the finest of its pioneering youth to the revival of the Jewish people in the land of Israel. The achievements of this youth bear witness to the capacities latent in Russian Jewry and the aspirations that live within it, and all the external pressures, physical and spiritual, cannot crush or destroy it. The foundations for the resurgence of the Jewish state were laid mainly by Jews from Russia and eastern Europe, and in May, 1948, the state of Israel was proclaimed.

The adherents of Jewish independence refuse to rely on any foreign verdict. They are well aware of the limited numbers and capacity of the Jewish people; they can respect and esteem the great powers which are responsible for the fate of tens of millions of people and whose influence extends beyond the limits of their own territories. But there is one kingdom in which the Jewish people regard themselves as equal in all respects, even in the capacity to influence humanity at large and the generations to come, and that is the kingdom of the spirit and the vision. In this kingdom, neither quantity nor the size of armies has the last word. It is not through numerical strength or political and economic power that Jerusalem and Athens have left their mark on the culture of a large part of the human race.

In pointing out to the world a new way toward freedom, peace, justice, and equality, the advancement and redemption of humanity, and the realization of the dearest hopes of mankind in our day and in all generations — in these spheres the great and powerful nations have no monopoly.

The Jewish people, who after two thousand years of wandering and tribulation in every part of the globe have arrived at the first stage of renewed sovereignty in the land of their origins, will not abandon their historic vision and great spiritual heritage — the aspiration to combine their national redemption with universal redemption for all the peoples of the world. Even the greatest tragedy ever wrought by man against a people — the Hitlerite holocaust, which destroyed one third of the Jewish people — did not dim the

profound faith of all Jews, including those who went to their death in the ovens of Europe, in their national redemption and in that of mankind.

The Jewish people will not submit to foreign bondage or surrender to the great and the powerful in determining their future and their road to the vision of the Latter Days. In the state of Israel there is no barrier between the Jew and the man within us. Independence is indivisible.

There is no contradiction between spiritual independence and an attachment to humanity as a whole, just as political independence is not incompatible with international ties and economic independence does not necessitate economic autarchy. Every people draws sustenance from others, from the heritage of the generations, from the achievements of the human spirit in all eras and all countries. Mutual dependence is a cosmic and eternal law. There is nothing in the world, large or small, from the invisible electron to the most massive bodies in infinite space, which has no bonds with its fellows or with unlike bodies. The whole of existence is an infinite chain of mutual bonds, and this applies to the world of the spirit as well as to the world of matter. It is less conceivable today than in any previous generation that any people should dwell alone.

Now that, after our long journey through world history and all the countries of the globe, we have returned to our point of departure, and for the third time have established the commonwealth of Israel, we shall not cast off the rich and extensive international experience that we have acquired; we shall not retire into our shell. We shall open wide our windows to every aspect of world culture, and we shall endeavor to acquire all the spiritual and intellectual achievements of our day. We shall learn from all our teachers, but we shall guard our independence. We shall not succumb to separatism or isolationism; we shall preserve our bonds with the world outside, but not accept external domination. The roots of independence lie in the heart, in the soul, in the will of the people, and it is only through inner independence that it is possible to win and maintain external independence. The most dangerous form of bondage is the bondage of the spirit.

The Jewish people's rejection of the dominance of physical force, however, does not mean the denial of the place of physical force in life as a means of defense, to ensure life. We should be denying Jewish history from the days of Joshua Bin-Nun until the Israel Defense Forces if we were to deny the fact that on occasion there is a need and place for physical force to preserve life. That would be foreign to the spirit of the Jewish people.

From the days of the prophets to the times of Einstein, Jewish intuition, both religious and scientific, has always believed in the unity of the universe and of existence, in spite of their numerous forms and expressions. And although, since days of old, the finest sons of the Jewish people, the prophets, sages, and teachers, have always regarded the supreme mission of Israel as residing in the kingdom of the spirit, they have not belittled the body and its needs, for there is no soul without a body, and there can be no universal human ideals without the existence of national independence. In the establishment of the Jewish state, the victory of Jewish over Arab arms played a great and decisive role, but the root and origin of this victory lay in the moral and spiritual superiority of the Jewish defenders.

The faith of the Jewish people in the superiority of the spirit is bound up with their belief in the value of man. Man, according to the faith of the Jewish people, was created in the image of God. There could be no more profound, exalted, and far-reaching expression of the greatness, importance, and value of man than this; for the concept "God" in Judaism symbolizes the apex of goodness, beauty, justice, and truth. Human life, in the eyes of the Jewish people, is precious and sacred. The sons of man, created in the image of God, are equal in rights; they are an end in themselves, not a means. And it is no wonder that the sages of these people based the entire law on one great principle: "And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Love of one's neighbor applies not only to Jewish citizens. "The stranger that soiourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Even in ancient days, the people of Israel were distinguished by an original conception of history which had no parallel among the peoples of East or West, neither of Egypt nor Babylon, India nor China, nor Greece and Rome and their heirs in Europe, until modern times. Unlike the other ancient peoples, ours did not look backward to a legendary golden age in the past which has gone never to return, but turned their gaze to the future, to the Latter Days, in which the earth will be filled with knowledge as the waters cover the seas, when the nations will beat their swords into plowshares, when nation will not lift up sword against nation, or learn war any more.

That was the historical philosophy which the prophets of Israel bequeathed to their own people, and through their people to the best of all nations.

This expectation and faith in the future stood by our people during the tribulations of their long journey through history and have brought us to the beginnings of our national redemption, when we can also see the first gleams of redemption for the whole of humanity.