IMAGES OF ISRAEL
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

According to Wikipedia the Chinese are credited with first invoking the proverb, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Like all good proverbs the truth of this observation is both self evident and profound. Of course a picture speaks volumes about its subject and with regard to value, while the written word can certainly be credited with inspiring many to do much, pictures evoke emotional and powerful responses that transcended the obstacles of language and education. You can argue with words, debate their meaning or quibble with their translation, but a picture while also subject to the eye of the beholder tends to speak for itself.

And so I was impressed and curious when I picked up this week's Jewish Journal and beheld the cover image of Israeli Actress Shirly Brener; under the title Happy Birthday Israel, Actress Shirly Brener is just one reason to celebrate. If you separate the words from the picture for a moment, I didn't know or recognize this actress – but on first glance I would not have thought she was the face of Israel – frankly she doesn't look Jewish. But as I later read that is entirely the point – the image of Israel is changing, as Israel celebrates is 61st birthday this past Wednesday, it has not only grownup, but apparently it has also gone blonde.

And by blonde – what I mean to say is that Israel is trying hard to assimilate into western culture. After 61 years of being the outsider, the young scrappy nation of holocaust survivors, kibbutzniks, tough soldiers, bubbies and zaydies in short sleeve shirts and dusty sandals – Israel wants to be like the rest of the world. Indeed it yearns to be like the rest of the world, not only in pictures but in words and deeds as well. If the hope of the Jewish people, HaTikvah has been for 2,000 years a home of our own in our native land, then the choice of the next generation is to just be normal. To be a country like any other, held to the same standards, a full fledged member of the community of nations, whose very existence is no more in question than that of Australia, Spain or the United States.

But normalcy and acceptance has yet to be Israel's lot in life. In the life span of people 61 years is considered to attain the age of wisdom – even if your kids still don't listen to you.

Most 60 year olds that I know have raised their children and seen them establish their own roots and families. They have attained a level of professional and financial security and success that affords them the blessing of time for reflection and celebration. Though the current economic climate may have put off retirement and travel, most still have a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that they have paid there dues and can reap some of the rewards and benefits. At the very least they are taken seriously and treated with some degree of deference still reserved for an older generation.

But it is not so with nations, sixty years is but a blip in time, and for Israel it seems like much of the world hasn't even started counting yet. Each of Israel's 61 years has been

seen by many as an aberration, a historical anomaly that is continuously up for reconsideration. Surrounded on three sides by nations that want to push the tiny Jewish state into the sea. Held hostage by a resident population of Arab non-citizens that are themselves pawns in a great geopolitical chess game. Israel is the only UN member not permitted to stand for election to the full range of UN bodies and commissions. Imagine being 61, but being treated like a newborn everyday – that is Israel – only most people love a newborn baby – the same cannot be said for how Israel is treated in the world community.

But I want to go back to pictures for a moment, in part because being worth a 1,000 words they will help keep this sermon to its optimum word count. And also because is THIS is Israel's present we need to understand its past as we contemplate its future.

Rabbi Daniel Gordis; a friend, teacher and Israeli scholar living in Israel points to two iconic pictures of Israeli and modern Jewish history that every Israeli and most Jews have grown up with. These two images, he explains, "have come to represent two radically different eras - Jewish powerlessness under the Nazis, and Jews at the height of their power, when they captured the Old City of Jerusalem from the Jordanians."[1]



"The former period is represented in the minds of many Israelis by a black and white photograph of a Jewish boy, probably no older than nine or ten, dressed in his finest coat and hat, his black dress socks pulled up almost to his knees. He is the model of innocence, of European-Jewish financial and social success, and yet, he is pitiful - the very picture of vulnerability. His parents are not at his side, and no onlookers have come to comfort him. His hands raised high in surrender as a Nazi points a gun in his direction; the boy's fate depends entirely on the whim and will of his enemies. He might as well already be dead."[2]

"A very different image was taken at the Western Wall in the aftermath of the paratroopers' conquering of the Old City during the June 1967 Six Day War. This photo, by David Rubinger, is equally iconic. It, too, portrays Jews and soldiers - three, in fact. But now, the Jews and the soldiers are one and the same. No longer is the Jew the frightened boy looking away from the Nazi's gun somewhere in Europe. He is home, in Jerusalem, responsible for his own destiny."[3]



[1] Rabbi Daniel Gordis, Erev Yom Ha-Atzma'ut – A Brief Re p
4/28/2009
[2] ibid.
[3] ibid

Nothing in this image celebrates war. The soldiers' weapons are nowhere to be seen. Their helmets have been removed. The figure in the center - is young, almost boyish." The war is over, we can beat our swords into plowshares our spears into pruning hooks and make a nation for ourselves. We can dye our hair blonde, wear trendy clothes and make movies if we want. We can just be a country, we can just be!

"What captured the Jewish imagination was not the Jew as soldier, but the image of a Jew whose existential condition had been entirely altered in the period between those two photos, all because of the creation of the Jewish state. The Jewish state, Zionism promised, would radically alter the condition of the Jew in the world. No longer would Jews live and die at the whim of others. No longer would our children's safety be dependent on what our enemies decided."[4]

Today, Israelis are concerned that that has begun to change, that we are sliding inexorably back to the reality represented by the first image and that the smiling hope of normalcy represented by the cover of the Jewish Journal is but a fantasy that the world will never let us enjoy.

"For eight years, Palestinian rockets and mortars turned Israeli childhoods in Sderot and other cities into years of incessant fear. Thousands of Israeli children studied and slept - and some died - at the whim of Palestinian Kassam-launchers. And when Israel finally did respond, the world's outrage was instantaneous."[5]

Now an entire nation fears that they will once again stand with their hands raised above their heads, powerless as Iranian nuclear weapons are pointed at us and the world turns away. And to this some argue the solders must once again pick up their guns, put their helmets back on and do as the Israeli army has had to do every day and every year of the last 61, fight for Israel's very survival. But will either path result in this [HOLD UP JEWISH JOURNAL] being the next iconic picture of Israel? There are not enough bullets to eliminate all that desire our destruction and the community of nations has turned its back on our people far too many times for us to entrust our very survival to their best intentions. Indeed to much of the world our survival is not their intention.

And so what does Israel do? We do what has sustained our people for more than 5,000 years – we have a little faith and keep struggling for peace. "The very name 'Israel' connotes wrestling, struggling, grappling, the interaction of the human with what is beyond human." And so we tenaciously hold on to our land and also uphold our ideals. If there is one thing I have learned about 60 year olds, they can be stubborn when they know they are in the right. And so Israel must act its age, it must be stubborn and resolute. As long as our cause is just, as long as our actions are honorable and righteous then this can be our future. Because behind this pretty face is a bunch of tough old Jews!

[4] ibid
[5] ibid