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## JEWISH COMMENTARY

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# The Miracle at 75

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**I**N 1949, NINE MONTHS after the State of Israel was formally recognized by both U.S. President Truman and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin, Britain refused to acknowledge the existence of the first Jewish commonwealth to appear on the earth in 2,000 years. The Labor foreign minister, Ernest Bevin, known for his antipathy to Zionism, refused to consider that a fledgling Jewish state should be of interest when it was opposed by so many countries that seemed to matter more to Britain. In response, the leader of the opposition, Winston Churchill, stood in Parliament and delivered one of his addresses for the ages. He accused Bevin of presentism, of maintaining a stunted historical perspective.

“Whether the right honorable gentleman likes it or not,” Churchill said, “the coming into being of a Jewish state in Palestine is an event in world history to be viewed in the perspective, not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand or even three thousand years. That is a standard of temporal values or time-values which seems very much out of accord with the perpetual click-clack of our rapidly changing moods and of the age in which we live. This is an event in world history.”

Churchill’s words are worth bearing in mind as we consider the contretemps over judicial reform in Israel as the nation moves toward the 75th anniversary of its

inception. In the midst of all of the rancor, it is easy to overlook how remarkable, from a historical perspective, this anniversary actually is. It should be obvious, of course, that Israel’s birth was astounding: that, as Paul Johnson reflected in these pages, while 100 states came into being in the 20th century, only Israel’s birth counts as a miracle. But as we mark 75 years of a modern Jewish state, a study of history reveals another fascinating fact: This might be the most stable 75 years of government that the Jewish people have had in Jerusalem in all of Jewish history.

Can this be? Consider: Several thousand years ago, David first conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital and was soon after temporarily overthrown by his son Absalom. David was forced to flee the city, returning only after he had conquered and defeated his son’s forces. Solomon succeeded his father and ruled in peace and prosperity, whereupon the Israelite monarchy summarily split between kingdoms north and south, which is how the Holy Land remained until its conquest by Assyria and Babylon.

During the Second Temple period, Jewish independence was achieved by the Maccabees, creating a Hasmonean House that, almost immediately after it assumed a regal role, fell to infighting and civil war. This allowed for Rome’s entry into Jerusalem. In a certain sense, a third Jewish government was established in Jerusalem in the Jewish revolt against Rome of 66 C.E., which fell in the year 70 because of the internecine battles between rival rebel factions.

This means that a 75-year span in which a stable

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Jewish government that governs the Holy Land from the Negev to the Galilee has never happened before in Jerusalem; and this, to paraphrase Churchill, ought “to be viewed in the perspective, not of a generation or a century, but in the perspective of a thousand, two thousand or even three thousand years.”

There is, of course, much more for which to yearn in the Holy Land: Israel still has enemies, and, as I have noted constantly in this column, the Temple Mount remains a site in which Jewish worship is largely banned. The redeemed world described by Isaiah is not yet upon us. But for 75 years, the modern state of Israel has been led from Jerusalem, while European countries such as Spain (which transitioned from Franco to democracy in the 1970s) and France (whose Fifth Republic was founded in the 1950s) have experienced political convulsions and changes to their systems of government far more profound than any experienced in the Jewish state.

In the interim, Israel has engaged in dramatic democratic debates—from the question of accepting or rejecting reparations from Germany, to the transferal of the Sinai to Egypt, to Israel’s relations with the Palestinians.

In a similar way, it will debate, and ultimately decide, the future of its judicial system. Whatever one makes of these questions, historical perspective demands wonder, as well as gratitude for what has occurred.

Yet it is precisely historical perspective that is lacking in recent descriptions of a democratic debate over whether there should be *more*, not less, democratic involvement in limiting the power of Israel’s Supreme Court. Thus, as the Jewish state prepares to mark a historic milestone, we see headlines such as this one from the Times of Israel: “This Passover, Israel will recall ancient freedom under the threat of modern tyranny.” As if a democratic vote to change Israel’s judicial system were akin to Pharaonic enslavement! Mean-

while, Israel’s former prime minister, Naftali Bennet, informed the world that because of the debate over the judiciary, “Israel is in greater danger than at any time since the Yom Kippur War—security danger, diplomatic danger, economic danger, in danger of falling apart.” Yet after the Yom Kippur War, the Soviet Bloc was still in existence, and Israel, in the 1980s and 1990s, faced the danger of Saddam Hussein’s nuclear reactor and SCUD missiles, as well as terrorism. Today, in contrast, Israel has made peace with many Arab countries and has unprecedented diplomatic relationships with countries in the Far East. The nature of Israel’s judiciary is an important subject, but the fact that such a question is being debated in an independent Jewish polity ought not to be a source of apocalypticism. The *Jerusalem Post*’s Yaakov Katz, while worrying about the discord in Israel, insightfully reflected that for much of its history the country “didn’t have the luxury to think about how to appoint judges or what percentage of Knesset members were needed to override a Supreme Court decision. It was too busy simply trying to survive.”

The fact remains that deep down, many intuitively understand the truth of Churchill’s proposition: that Israel’s story is historically unlike any other. This is why the country continues to be a source of fascination for its friends and enemies alike. After all, can one imagine an internal domestic debate about the judiciary in a country much larger than Israel—say, India—attracting the attention of media and statesmen from around the world?

In the end, Churchill, held the day; Britain recognized the Jewish state, and Chaim Weizmann telegraphed to express his gratitude. Churchill sent a telegram in return, with only three words: “The light grows.” May it continue to grow, a sign in our often humdrum world of the wonder that is Jewish history itself. 📖➡️

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