The State Of Israel And The Privilege Of Unawareness (1880-1914)

אִם יִהְיֶה נִדַּחֲךָ בִּקְצֵה הַשָּׁמָיִם מִשָּׁם יְקַבֶּצְךָ
ה‘ אֱלֹקֶיךָ וּמִשָּׁם יִקָּחֶךָ וֶהֱבִיאֲךָ ה‘ אֱלֹקֶיךָ
אֶל –הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר –יָרְשׁוּ אֲבֹתֶיךָ וִירִשְׁתָּהּ
וְהֵיטִבְךָ וְהִרְבְּךָ מֵאֲבֹתֶיךָ

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This Wednesday night May 4th we will begin the celebrations of Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel’s Independence Day. The return of the Jewish people to their land is undoubtedly one of the greatest miracles in the history of mankind. It has never happened that a defeated nation survived among other nations, and returned to its land, after almost 2,000 years of exile. We must become aware of the magnitude of this miracle, appreciate the Jewish State, and be infinitely grateful to God for belonging to the generation of Jews who were born with an already existing “Israel”, and who enjoy the incredible privilege of taking a Jewish State for granted.

THE FIRST IMMIGRANTS

In 1870, only about 25,000 Jews lived in Israel. Jews were the majority of the residents of Safed and Jerusalem, most of them Sephardic Jews. Between 1880 and 1914, tens of thousands of Jews began arriving in Israel from Europe, escaping horrific persecutions, pogroms, and massacres. Rabbi Isaac haCohen Kuk (1865–1935), one of the most important leaders of the religious Zionist movement, said that he could not help but see European antisemitism *“as a providential way of pushing Jews back to their land.”* In the first wave of migration known as “The First Aliyah” (1880-1905), some 25,000 Jews from Europe arrived in Israel. Then, in the second Aliyah,

(1905–1914), another 35,000 Jews arrived in Israel. However, not all Jews fleeing Europe made it to Israel. Many emigrated to the United States, Argentina, Australia to England. Why? Because Israel –which in those years was part of the Ottoman Empire– was a no man's land. Mostly abandoned. There was no work. And life there was very, very difficult. At the beginning of 1900, some 2,500 Jews also arrived from Yemen.

A DIFFICULT TIME

In his book "Innocents Abroad" Mark Twain described Israel with these words: "….. A desolate country whose soil is rich enough, but is given over wholly to weeds… a silent mournful expanse…. a desolation…. we never saw a human being on the whole route…. hardly a tree or shrub anywhere. Even the olive tree and the cactus, those fast friends of a worthless soil, had almost deserted the country." Many efforts were made to support the first immigrants. It is worth highlighting the great benefactors of that time: Sir Moshe Montefiore (1784-1885) and Baron de Rothschild (1845-1934), who were instrumental in buying land, building cities, and organizing agricultural colonies. But despite all efforts, within a few years of arriving, most of the new immigrants ended up leaving Israel due to the extremely difficult living conditions, lack of work and hostility from the local Arab population. Of the 25,000 Jews who had arrived in the first wave of migration, only 5,000 remained, which included the 2,500 Jews from Yemen. And of the 50,000 Jewish immigrants who arrived between 1905 and 1914, the half ended up leaving Israel. Some returned to Europe, but most emigrated to the United States, which had already absorbed a million Jews between 1850 and 1900, and the trend continued to rise (in 1924 the Jewish population of the United States reached almost 3 million people).

A FADING DREAM?

The situation in Israel in the years before the First World War was neither good nor promising. The Jewish colony in

Israel, instead of growing, was getting smaller. Emigration from Europe was also interrupted, among other reasons, by the massive wave of assimilation. Unfortunately, as a result of anti-Semitic persecution, many Jews ended up converting to Christianity to avoid dispossession and death. On the other hand, many of those who left Europe sought other horizons, especially in the Americas.

All this could be solved if the Jews could have an independent state and take charge of it, politically and economically. But despite the efforts of Zionist activists, political support for a Jewish state could not be garnered. When the famous Zionist leader Theodore Herzl (1860-1904) desperately asked Pope Pius X for his support in creating a state in which Russia's Jews could escape pogroms and death, the Pope's scathing response was emblematic: "as long as the Jews do not convert to Christianity, they would not count on their support"….

In 1914 it seemed that the return of the people of Israel to the land of their ancestors had stopped, and the dream of a State of their own was further away than ever…

And in July of that year, the First World War began.

To be continued…

THE RENAISSANCE OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Despite all the difficulties in re-establishing a Jewish state and starting a new life in Israel, in the early years of the 20th century an incredible event, unprecedented in world history, took place: the revival of the Hebrew language – a language that was not used in daily life for almost 20 centuries. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858–1922) was instrumental in this area. He published articles on the need to revive the Hebrew language and participated in the project known as the Ben-Yehuda Hebrew Dictionary. However, what ultimately facilitated the revitalization of the language was the

development of schools in settlements, cities, and agricultural colonies (see the photo above of a kindergarten in Israel from 1905). The Hebrew language served as the language that united the new European immigrants, who spoke Russian or Yiddish, with the already established Sephardic Jews, who spoke Arabic or Ladino. Hebrew, which began as a colloquial language and for everyday conversation, became the official language of the Jews and