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Not just a miracle

Israel is an accumulation of miracles

• By ARDIE GELDMAN

The State of Israel should not exist. Thank God that it does, but taking stock of the unlikely confluence of historical events and circumstances that culminated in its founding in May 1948 forces upon one the realization that the existence of the modern State of Israel defies all probability and reason. Without any one of the following having transpired, Israel would not have been born.

First to consider is the incomparable survival of the Jewish people after nearly 2000 years of Diaspora existence. Throughout history, people have been exiled from their homelands whereupon within a few generations they lost their language, religion, customs and eventually their national identity; their assimilation was complete.

Jewish autonomy in the Land of Israel ended with the Jewish-Roman Wars, the last of three which were fought between 132-136 CE. In spite of the toll taken by persecution and assimilation in subsequent centuries, Jews worldwide, even after adopting different local customs, succeeded in retaining their historic national identity and sense of peoplehood.

A second factor is the revival of the dormant Hebrew language and its effective adaptation to the modern world. Much of a people's culture is embedded in its language. For Jews, this is particularly true. The Hebrew language is the umbilical cord that links ancient Israel and modern Israel and lends life to the latter. A Yiddish, Ladino, German or English-speaking Israel would not have united the Jewish people.

No other language having fallen into disuse over time has been so successfully rejuvenated, enough to manage a modern nation-state, perform the most complex brain surgery, and even send a satellite to the moon.

The third is, after nearly two millennia, the return of a critical mass of Jews, highly motivated and sufficiently skilled to have established a viable economy where none before had existed. In the past, other Jews, individuals, families, and even communities, had attempted to resettle in the Land of Israel.

Their efforts were either short-lived or of limited impact. By the time Israel declared its independence, a mere 50 years after the progenitor of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, called for a Jewish state, the Jewish repopulation in the Land of Israel had reached some 600,000 souls.

The fourth factor emerges from the third, yet vital in its own right. The Jews who comprised the second aliyah, the second relatively large wave of immigration lasting from 1904-1914, were responsible for creating the nascent social, economic, military, educational, health, cultural and political institutions that over the next few decades coalesced into the pre-state infrastructure of Israel.

Due to the effective development of these organizations, their respective leadership, and a shared commitment to building a new society, the Jewish community living under



THEN-US PRESIDENT Harry S. Truman is joined by his wife Bess and daughter Margaret in this photo from 1951. President Truman viewed himself as the Cyrus of modern Israel. (US National Archives/Reuters)

the British Mandate, the Yishuv, was able to emerge as a full-blown state in 1948.

FIFTH IS vice president Harry S. Truman succeeding President Franklin D. Roosevelt upon the latter's death while still in office on April 12, 1945. Roosevelt, who harbored antisemitic sentiments, strongly rejected the idea of the Jews achieving any form of national autonomy in Palestine.

If he had still been president on November 29, 1947 when the decision concerning the future of Palestine came before the United Nations, it is certain that the US would not have voted to partition the land and consent to separate national independence for its Jewish and Arab communities. Truman, once an unpretentious, small-town haberdasher from Missouri, unexpectedly rose to high office to become, as he viewed himself, the Cyrus of modern Israel.

Sixth: From the time of the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the "striped pants boys" of the US State Department indefatigably opposed the creation of a "homeland for the Jewish People" in the historic Land of Israel. American interests, it was believed, would best be served by aligning US policy with the vastly larger and richer Arab-Muslim regimes. This view came to a head in the days and hours leading up to the United Nations vote on partition.

In spite of strenuous opposition by secretary of state George C. Marshall, undersecretary of state Robert Lovett, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the CIA, president Truman instructed the American delegation to vote in favor of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181. Months later, on May 14, 1948, he recognized the provisional Jewish government as the de facto authority of the newly founded Jewish state.

American de jure recognition of Israel was delayed until January 31, 1949, following his elected return to office. Would the UN vote for partition have passed without America's endorsement? In light of the international influence held by the US following the Second World War, its vote was

certainly consequential.

Seventh, even more inexplicable and mysterious than Truman's improbable backing for the new Jewish state, was support for Israel's independence, and even her military defense in the subsequent war, from a far more unlikely source. Following the end of World War II, despite Josef Stalin's distrust of all of America's moves within the international arena, the Soviet Union, including four of its satellite states, Belorussia, Ukraine, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, voted alongside the US in favor of UN Resolution 181.

Three days following Israel's declaration of independence, the Soviets voted to recognize the State of Israel, the first country to do so. The Soviet Union, virtually from the beginning of the regime, opposed Zionism. It characterized Zionism as another example of regressive, bourgeois nationalism as well as an outpost of British imperialism.

There was no reason to believe that the Soviets would support an independent Jewish state. Some historians speculate that Stalin and his minions convinced themselves that a new Jewish state, founded on a heavily socialist-based economy, would join its sphere of influence in opposition to capitalism and the West. Beyond its political support, the Soviet Union, presumably at the directive of Stalin, approved the sale by Czechoslovakia of the arms that Israel desperately needed in its war of independence.

"They saved the country, I have no doubt of that," said Israeli prime minister David Ben-Gurion years later. And according to Abba Eban, Israel's first UN ambassador, "without the Soviet vote in favor of partition and the votes of the four satellite nations, and without the arms provided by the Soviet bloc, we couldn't have made it, either diplomatically or militarily."

FINALLY, THE purchase of Czech arms at the beginning of 1948 gave the fledgling Jewish state a fighting chance. (The US, in contrast, had placed an arms embargo on Israel.) But the likelihood of Israel's army,

dependent upon a large number of untrained Jewish refugees recently liberated from Nazi concentration camps or released from British detention camps, defeating a much larger, combined Arab military force was viewed with pessimism by many, including those in the US Department of Defense.

Local Arabs began their assault on pre-state Israel on November 29, the very day of the UN partition vote. As of May 15 the following year, in response to British withdrawal and Israel's declaration of independence the day before, local Arab belligerents were joined in a coordinated attack by the armies of five neighboring Arab countries. These had at their disposal an overwhelming superiority of heavy equipment – armor, artillery and air power.

In spite of the odds, the Israel Defense Forces advanced by winning one strategic victory after another. During the first half of 1949, one by one, Israel's neighbors, beginning with Egypt on February 20th, dropped out of the war and signed an armistice agreement. The newly established State of Israel not only successfully defended itself against multiple invading Arab armies, it also captured some 5,000 square kilometers over and above what it was allotted by the now defunct United Nations partition plan.

Any one of the above occurrences strains the imagination, but each really happened. How all of these collectively culminated in the rebirth of the Jewish state seems impossible; still the seemingly impossible took place on the 5th of Iyar, 5708, May 14, 1948.

No miracle should be overlooked or taken for granted; how much more so such an improbable succession of miracles. The wonder of this needs to be told, time and again, especially at this moment when Israelis are divided, struggling with doubt, dispute and even despair.

Happy 75th birthday to the modern State of Israel, born of many miracles.

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