

## Cantor's Message: Envisioning Israel at 60: Reflections of a Many-Faceted Prism

We have all been barraged for months now with advertisements, announcements, letters in the mail, magazine articles and special programs related to the forthcoming *Yom Ha'Atzma'ut* 60th Anniversary Celebration of the State of Israel. In fact, I myself recently organized and moderated an academic symposium at the City University of New York Graduate Center's Center for Jewish Studies entitled "Beyond Boundaries: Music and Israel @ 60." Through papers, discussions and musical performances, the daylong symposium presented a sampler of the complex diversity of musical styles, cultures, ethnicities and religions that Israel is today. Scholars from as far as Berkeley, California and Jerusalem, Israel spoke on such diverse topics as "National Identities Playing Musical Chairs: Israeli Art Music from 1948-2008," "Beyond Ethnic Tinge and Ethnic Fringe: Playing Across Israel's Ethnic Divide," and "The Piyyut Craze: Straddling the Sacred and the Secular in Israel's Public Square."

With the exception of scholars of contemporary life and culture in Israel, such as those participating in the symposium, however, how many of us really have our fingers on the true pulse of life in Israel today? Some of us have close friends and relatives in Israel and we experience Israel through the narratives of their everyday lives and what they report based on what they see on television, hear on the radio and read in the papers. Others of us have spent time there recently, and, with our ears to the ground, we are able to build our own images and opinions, as well as confer, learn, argue, debate with friends and relatives there and at home.

The truth is, however, that for the majority of us, our understanding of the Israel of today is shaped a continent plus an ocean plus a sea away, in other words – **at a distance**. And that *at a distance perspective* often creates in our own minds, and even perhaps in our own hearts, a vision of Israel that is not necessarily a true reflection of Israel as it truly is at 60, but rather, Israel as we might have wished it had become.

We all connect viscerally at Bar and Bat Mitzvah and Jewish wedding celebrations when familiar Jewish and Israeli music is played. We weep at the wedding songs from *Shir Hashirim*, such as *Dodi Li* and *Eti M'L'vanon*, just as we stand with pride as we sing out to the words of *Hatikvah!* during commemorations and celebrations of our Jewishness and our achievement of a Jewish state. We tend not to remember that there are Israeli citizens who are Arabs and entitled to the respectful treatment their citizenship entitles them to. We tend also not to remember that there is a population of Mizrahi and Ethiopian, i.e. non-Ashkenazic, Jews, who are impoverished and lacking in many basic needs. In other words, even within Israel's borders of today, not everything is a pretty picture.

Additionally, there has been a very steep price humanity has paid and continues to pay as we struggle to find a true, lasting and fair peace in the land of Israel, or has become a more commonly pronounced trope, the lands of Israel/Palestine. History is an evolving phenomenon. We have witnessed in Israel a most amazing progress unparalleled historically in the development of nationhood, but it has not come without its grievous costs. We recognize that we cannot feel truly free until all peoples have freedom and respect each other's freedom and right to exist. This is what we all hope and strive for as

we commemorate Israel's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and celebrate the achievements our people have created in this Jewish homeland.

To that end, let us strive to broaden our perspective and allow the realities of Israel's collective humanity to be understood by we who live in America and experience Israel at a distance. Attending programs and reading books and newspapers that provide many different perspectives can widen our own lenses through which we form our understanding of Israel at 60. A most interesting collection of essays I recommend in this regard is *Envisioning Israel: The Changing Ideals and Images of North American Jews* edited by Allon Gal. While published in 1996, over a decade ago, it provides an excellent platform of understanding regarding the many-faceted prisms through which American Jews perceive and think about our Jewish homeland, *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel which we love and cherish so dearly and which continues to have so many challenges.