

HAIM LASKOV, who was my childhood hero and a friend of my father's, once said to me a few years before the State of Israel was founded: "Your name is the most important asset you have. Keep it pure, because once it is sullied, nothing can ever restore it to what it was." He spoke with magisterial gravity. I was young and impressionable. For me he represented all that was good, heroic and noble about the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community of Palestine). I accepted what he said not just as a personal guideline but as a basic principle of our society which was already moving inexorably towards statehood. Laskov eventually became Israel's Chief of Staff, and remained to his dying day naively pure of spirit and engagingly obtuse.

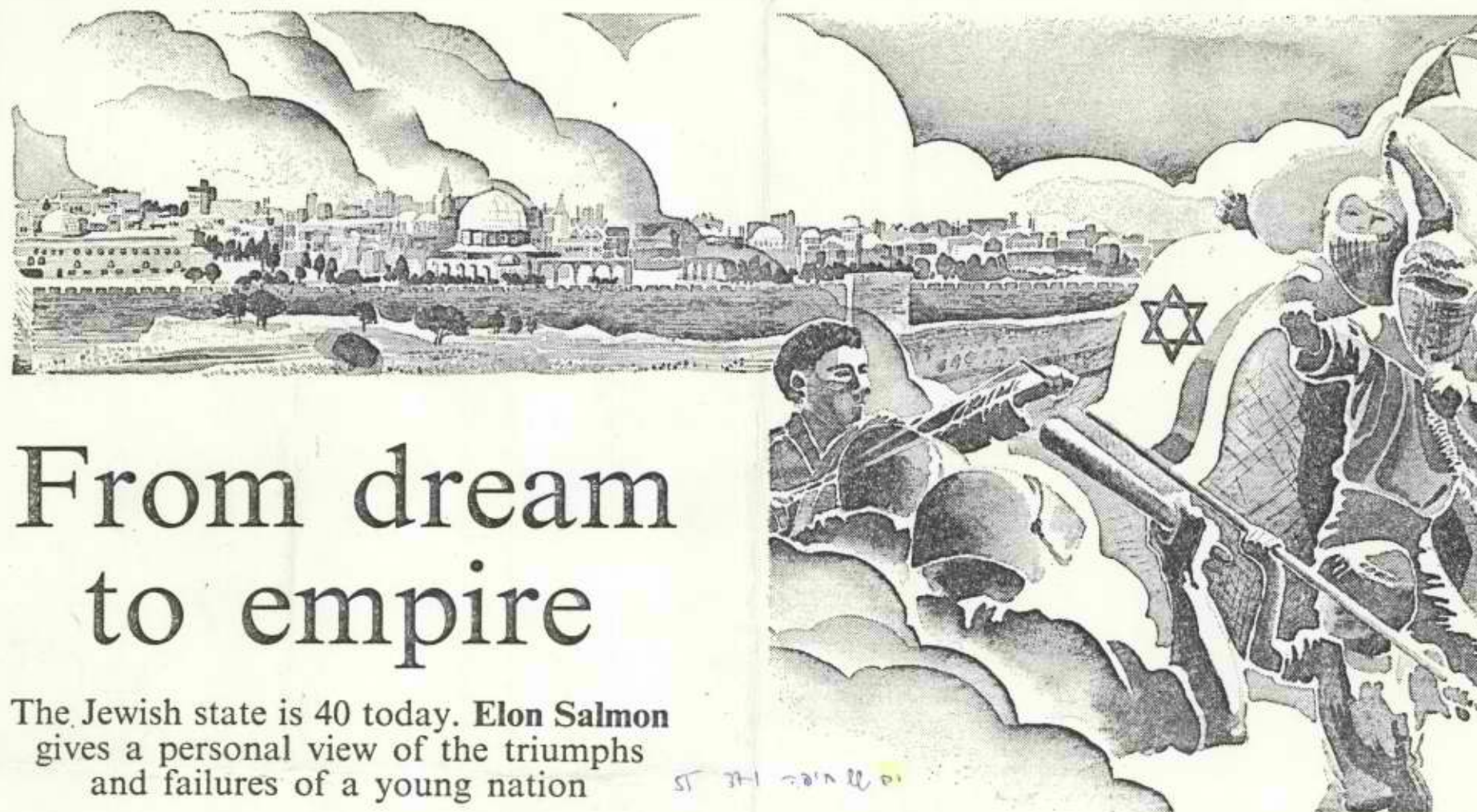
We lived on Mount Carmel. Haifa in the 1940s had the double charm of vigour and languid Mediterranean decadence. From our house you could see the sweep of Haifa Bay, braced by hills and a pale horizon. On the opposite ridge perched the Arab village of Kabbabir, its white and blue houses clustered round a slender minaret. Carmel Centre was the hub of this gleaming suburb, inhabited by many *Yekkes*, immigrants from Germany. Here, surrounded by tall pines, was Café El Dorado, where elderly ladies, and informers, sat in the afternoons, sipping coffee to the strains of bygone Viennese hits.

The assured calm on Mount Carmel was deceptive, for behind the scenes, the *Hagana*, Israel Defence Forces' progenitor, was already planning Haifa's conquest, while a few miles down the hill, in Hadar and down-town Haifa, Jews and Arabs were drawn in battle lines, testing each other in occasional forays. Haifa, industrially the most important of Palestine's cities, with its port and large Arab population, was of crucial strategic value. We had no doubt as to who would possess her when the moment of truth came. Nor, I suspect, did the Arabs, many of whom began leaving the city as early as December 1947, almost as soon as the United Nations passed the resolution calling for the partition of Palestine, on November 29.

One of those, who disappeared from my life around about that time, was Assma. Our maid for years, Assma was virtually a member of the family. She was also an infallible barometer of the moods of Haifa's Arabs: whenever tension rose, Assma would stay away. She would eventually return with gifts - sugared almonds or a finch in a cage which I would promptly set free. "*Asfur, ya elbi* - a bird, my love" she would say to me. We would greet her without a word about her absence, as if nothing had happened. I often wonder what became of her.

Today, the phrase *Eretz Yisrael* - the Land of Israel - carried certain political connotations. In the early days and up to 1967, it was simply how we referred to the country. We were proud of our country, and of the *Yishuv's* achievements. One *Passover* my cousins and I were given roller skates as presents. My more pragmatic cousins chose the popular British-made brand. I was persuaded by an over-idealistic classmate to opt for the locally-made model. My Jewish skates disintegrated within a week. I never learned to skate.

For all the diversity and divisions - Ashkenazim and Sephardim, seculars and religious, socialists and revisionists - we were essentially a cohesive community with our own language, our own institutions, and our own perceptions of life born of our own priorities and values. We were a nation long before the State of Israel was



Victoria Granville

From dream to empire

The Jewish state is 40 today. Elon Salmon gives a personal view of the triumphs and failures of a young nation

declared. Sir Isaiah Berlin had made the point: when Hitler's armies threatened Palestine from the north and south, the *Yishuv* did not flee but resolutely prepared to defend itself. This was home. Perhaps the Arabs' greatest mistake in 1948 was not to appreciate this.

My generation was brought up to believe that only Zionism as exemplified by the *Yishuv* could provide the answer to the problem of the Jews as a persecuted minority in the world. Was not the holocaust proof that even assimilation was illusory? In retrospect, it seems to me that the burden of setting the example understandably blinkered our vision as regards the sensibilities and traditions of diaspora Jews, and of the Arabs among whom we lived. So preoccupied were we with our own destiny and the narrow logic of our cause that its rejection by the Arabs seemed to us irrational, benighted and primitive.

Nothing epitomised the New Jew which the *Yishuv* had been striving to create more emphatically than the Kibbutz. Among kibbutzim, Mishmar Ha'emek, situated in eastern Jezreel and belonging to the left-wing Mapam party, rated as one of the finest. Why my father, who did not belong to Mapam, and who was a follower of David Ben Gurion to whom Mapam was a constant source of aggravation, chose to send me to Mishmar Ha'emek has remained a mystery to me. However, at the beginning of 1948 I was quietly deposited in the bosom of that kibbutz whose members - and children - regarded urban people with anything ranging from outright disdain to pity.

Typical to the kibbutz movement as a whole, Mishmar Ha'emek society was clan-

nish and elitist. The qualities it fostered in its sons and daughters were reticence, laconic demeanour, contempt for creature comforts, directness, truthfulness, above all, courage. A person possessed of these was a true kibbutznik and thus the very antithesis of the traditional Jew from whom the kibbutz sought to distance itself. Like the Spartans, kibbutzniks who left the rigors of their kibbutz for town life often indulged to excess in what had been denied them on the kibbutz. But although the entire population of all the kibbutz movements amounted to less than 20 per cent of the *Yishuv*, the kibbutz continued to be a determining influence on all aspects of Israeli life well into the 1970s. The kibbutz taught you to fight, if you had to, without hate, and never to hurt the defenceless - the "purity of arms". Both ideals were eventually battered in the rough and tumble of reality.

A number of Arab villages were neighbours of Mishmar Ha'emek. Relations were friendly. But in March 1948 there was a discernible cooling off. Soon, many villagers were leaving with their belongings. Reports were coming in that spearhead units of Fawzi al Quawugli's Arab Liberation Army were taking up positions in the villages. The Hagana was duly worried: Mishmar Ha'emek dominated the Jenin-Haifa road, a major route of the anticipated invasion of the Arab armies. If the adults of the kibbutz were worried too, they kept it well concealed. The kibbutz had rifles, pistols, grenades, and couple of light machine guns. Its members were trained in the use of arms.

On the evening of April 4, as we were sitting down to supper, one of the kibbutz's commanders suddenly appeared. He was wearing a leather bandoleer and carried a rifle. "Children," he said, grinning,

"the Arabs have got us surrounded, poor devils. So finish your supper and join the other class in the concrete house." (Ours had a tiled roof and was therefore more vulnerable to artillery).

The attack on Mishmar Ha'emek - one of the most crucial in the first phase of Israel's War of Independence - lasted six days. During a brief truce arranged by the British, the children were evacuated to other kibbutzim in Jezreel. When the fighting ended, the Arab Liberation Army's brief inglorious career was over. All the villages which surrounded the kibbutz were razed.

I was back in Haifa with my family when Ben Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel at 4 pm on May 14 1948, just a few hours after the last British soldier left Palestine. The jubilation was the most spontaneous and emotional I have ever witnessed. A dream had become real, as we knew it would. Yet it was hard to believe. Haifa, now in Jewish hands and emptied of its Arab population, looked to me drained of colour and anaemic. The next day the Arab countries invaded: the real war had begun.

More than 6,000 Jewish men and women died in the War of Independence. But Israel's military prowess was firmly established, together with a lasting residue of contempt for the Arabs.

My father had a bad war. Instead of emerging a hero poised for a political career, as were many of his friends, he got blown to bits by one of our own land mines and spent most of the war in hospital. As compensation, he was appointed Military Attaché to the London Embassy, an important post since Britain was a major arms supplier to the newly-born

Jewish state. Israel's first jets were Gloster Meteors, and promising officers were sent to the staff college at Camberley.

The Fifties were Israel's formative years. Winning the war was one thing; building the foundation for an orderly democratic state beset with enormous problems, was another. The great immigration of Jews from North Africa was under way, over half a million people, many were penniless, illiterate, unskilled and in poor health. The abrupt dislocation from their own culture to an alien society enhanced their disorientation. Potentially a source of strength, they were, for the time being, a heavy burden. Israel was short of resources and lacking in experience to deal with such a contingency.

At a War Office cocktail party in London, my father found himself alongside his Jordanian opposite number. "I thought you Jews were clever," the Jordanian colonel said. "I'm no longer sure. You threw out of Palestine half a million civilized, hard-working, intelligent Arabs, and now you have taken in half a million primitive, useless Arabs. Whatever for?"

The Sixties was a period of intense growing pains for Israel. The economy was foundering, and with it came a deepening disillusionment with the government and the establishment. Stories of corruption and incompetence in high places were almost a weekly occurrence in Israel's indomitably outspoken press. If you were Wasp - White Ashkenazi Sabra with *Protekzia* (connections) - you were all right. If you were Sephardi, even God was not interested. Social divisions became more marked, particularly between the Ashkenazim of European descent, and the

Sephardim whose growing mistrust of the ruling Labour establishment was expressed in the most extreme form by the rise of the Black Panthers group.

The Six Days War of 1967 changed everything. Driving to Jerusalem from the north through the conquered West Bank, I met a kibbutznik friend, paratrooper, coming the opposite way. He was red-eyed from fatigue. We got out of our Jeeps and stared at each other in silence for a moment. "I'm glad to see you're all in one piece," he said at last. Then he told me with a wry smile how the IDF Chief Chaplain, Rabbi Goren, was rushing about the West Bank, blowing his *shofar* as though the Messiah was coming. A friend of ours had been killed at the Lions' Gate in the assault on the Old City.

As the Palestinians of Jerusalem began returning to their homes, Jewish Jerusalemites went out to greet them with food and soft drinks. The country looked forward to peace. Levi Eshkol, a deeply decent and under-rated prime minister, offered the territories in return for peace. The offer was rejected outright by the Arabs and the PLO at Khartoum in November that year: "No to peace, no to recognition, no to negotiations" was their response.

But all at once Israel was given a new lease of life. In the aftermath of the war the economy picked up. So did the nation's morale and its standing in the world. Slowly attitudes were hardening; a blind national purpose, allied with religious messianism, began to seep into Israel's policies in the conquered territories. The Messiah, of course, did not come. Instead the Holy Jewish Empire was born.

In taking stock of Israel's past forty years, its many remarkable achievements are weighed against a list of failures and traumas: social divisions; flagging immigration and rising emigration; increased dependence on the US; the Yom Kippur War of 1973 when briefly Israel stared at defeat; the lurch to the right with the rise of Likud; the consequent disastrous invasion of Lebanon, and the ugly tragedy taking place in the occupied territories. It is these, rather than the achievements, which exercise the minds of critics as well as friends when they ask if Israel has fulfilled the promise it held in its founding.

The question is premature and irrelevant. Forty years is not long in the life of a nation. Israel is unattractive now, but not yet set in its ways. The dynamic situation in the region alone will not allow it that. Debate within Israel about its own society - about the territories - is more vigorous than ever. Moreover, like other nations but more so, Israel has been influenced by extraneous relations and pressures, which in its case have been adverse in the extreme. These too may change, and then so would Israel.

As for the promise that marked Israel's creation, the expectations it raises are inevitably subjective. Should the Jewish state be considered a "special case" among nations, obliged to uphold superior values, even when its Arab neighbours have consistently denied its right to exist and, with the exception of Egypt, continue to do so? Are the Jews inherently different from other people and should they therefore be judged by different criteria?

If the answer is "no" to these questions, then compare Israel with other countries of the same age, and with its neighbouring states. The comparison would not be to Israel's disadvantage.

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