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STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

A peer-reviewed e-journal of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations

Published by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel: Reflections on its Sixtieth Anniversary

Volume 3 (2008): 1- 15

<http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol3>

On May 14, 1948, on the eve of the expiration of the British Mandate, Jewish leaders in Mandatory Palestine gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum and issued a Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel. Like the American Declaration of Independence, this document sets forth their rationale for the formation of the state and the ideals that these leaders hoped it would embody. The founding of the state, mandated by the United Nations, was greeted with widespread joy in the Jewish world and with universal belligerence in the Arab world. Many parts of the Christian world, in many ways caught between the two and embedded in the legacy of its own anti-Judaism, were dismayed over this resumption of Jewish sovereignty over the Holy Land.

Now, sixty years later, a revolution has occurred in the teachings of the Catholic and many Protestant churches about Jews and Judaism. In dialogue settings, the topic of Israel is very much on the table, no longer the proverbial “elephant in the room,” even if full understanding remains an unattained goal. In this context, the editors of *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* have invited a series of brief reflections on the text of the “Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel” from the perspective of the author’s own engagement in Christian-Jewish relations.



Provisional Government of Israel

Official Gazette, Number 1;
Tel Aviv, 5 Iyar 5708,
14.5.1948 Page 1

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses. Pioneers, defiant returnees, and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving

Reflections on the Declaration

Raymond Cohen

“Fear not, nor be alarmed.”

When David Ben-Gurion read out the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, Arab armies were poised to invade the new state, and Jerusalem was cut off from the coastal plain under siege. Since UN resolution 181 of November 29, 1947 on the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states, the 600,000-strong *Yishuv* – Jewish community in Palestine – had been under continuous attack from Arab irregulars. Its survival was in doubt, and indeed British General Bernard Montgomery argued that without the protection of departing British forces it would not withstand an onslaught by regular Arab armies. [\(Continued on page 6\)](#)

Deborah Weissman

The first response evoked by rereading the Declaration is a sense of the unlikelihood of its being passed today. We Israelis seem so much more divided on the cores issues that it would be difficult to imagine a document of this nature being adopted by such a wall-to-wall (*Agudat Yisrael* to the Communists!) coalition. This may give rise, for the supernaturalists among us, to a feeling of the miraculous character of the establishment of the State of Israel. But apart from that, and from a strictly rational perspective, we can point to at least three problematic areas that have developed in the ensuing sixty years. [\(Continued on page 7\)](#)

community controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood.

In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.

This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and *Eretz-Israel* and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home.

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people - the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe - was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in *Eretz-Israel* the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the community of nations.

Survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to *Eretz-Israel*, undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their national homeland.

In the Second World War, the Jewish community of this country contributed its full share to the struggle of the freedom- and peace-loving nations against the forces of Nazi wickedness and, by the blood of its soldiers and its war effort, gained the right to be reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations.

James Bernauer, SJ

When the Declaration was proclaimed, I was but three years of age and yet its words speak afresh to my feelings as a moral agent today. I feel gratitude that a special haven for Jews has been established, that, as the document states, the *Shoah* will not be ignored and that from that evil event's destructiveness, a will to create was embraced and not a spirit of revenge. As a former New Yorker and a current Bostonian, I feel relieved, however, that the founding of the State of Israel did not lead to the disappearance of the Jewish diaspora communities as had been occasionally advocated in the nation's early years.

[\(Continued on page 8\)](#)

Eugene Korn

Israel's Declaration of Independence is a remarkable document, born no less of the prophetic dreams of Micah 4 and Isaiah 2 for universal peace and human security than of the long Jewish experience in exile that demanded an end to homelessness and suffering. The Declaration seems complete as an expression of the ideal. The political reality of Israel is – as in all human reality – imperfect, reflecting unfulfilled aspirations. [\(Continued on page 9\)](#)

Ruth Lutt, OP

On May 14, 1948, the founders of the modern state of Israel issued the nascent state's founding document, the *Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel* (the "Declaration"). In it they articulated the principles their state would be based on, including "freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel;..." A little less than twenty years later the

On the 29th November, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in *Eretz-Israel*; the General Assembly required the inhabitants of *Eretz-Israel* to take such steps as were necessary on their part for the implementation of that resolution. This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State is irrevocable.

This is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.

Accordingly we, members of the People's Council, representatives of the Jewish Community of *Eretz-Israel* and of the Zionist Movement, are here assembled on the day of the termination of the British Mandate over *Eretz-Israel* and, by virtue of our natural and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in *Eretz-Israel*, to be known as the State of Israel.

We declare that, with effect from the moment of the termination of the Mandate being tonight, the eve of Sabbath, the 6th *Iyar*, 5708 (15th May, 1948), until the establishment of the elected, regular authorities of the State in accordance with the Constitution which shall be adopted by the Elected Constituent Assembly not later than the 1st October 1948, the People's Council shall act as a Provisional Council of State, and its executive organ, the People's Administration, shall be the Provisional Government of the Jewish State, to be called "Israel." The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Roman Catholic Church unequivocally repudiated anti-Semitism in *Nostra Aetate*. *Nostra Aetate*, however, was silent as to a Christian understanding of the Jewish state, and it would be another twenty years before the church would grapple with this issue. ([Continued on page 10](#))

Leonard Greenspoon

The declaration establishing the modern State of Israel begins with this affirmation: "ERETZ-ISRAEL [literally, the Land of Israel] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books." It is interesting to observe that, within this statement, there is no description of the geographical or political entity that Eretz-Israel encompasses. ([Continued on page 11](#))

Ursula Rudnick

Among the many images conjured up by the State of Israel are memories of my year of studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1984/5. Participating in the programme "Studies in Israel", designed for students of theology to study classical Jewish texts as well as to learn about contemporary Jewish life, was a unique opportunity not only to study the classical texts of rabbinic Judaism, but to encounter many different Jewish people and traditions. In Israel, worlds of Judaism opened up and I started out on a path which led me to being active in Jewish-Christian relations to this very day. As a German Protestant theologian I strongly feel that it is not appropriate to express what should have been articulated in the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel or to criticise its content. ([Continued on page 12](#))

We appeal - in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

The State of Israel is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic union of the whole of *Eretz-Israel*.

We appeal to the United Nations to assist the Jewish people in the building-up of its State and to receive the State of Israel into the community of nations.

We extend our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

We appeal to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream – the redemption of Israel.

Placing our trust in the Almighty, we affix our signatures to this proclamation at this session of the provisional Council of State, on the soil of the Homeland, in the city of Tel-Aviv, on this Sabbath eve, the 5th day of *Iyar*, 5708 (14th May, 1948).

Dennis Hale

Sixty years after the fact, the Israeli Statehood Declaration is remarkable for the modesty of its claims. While the American Declaration of Independence proclaims self-evident and universal truths, the Israeli Declaration proclaims only that Jews may do what others may do: govern themselves in their own land, exercising the same right to statehood that is possessed by all peoples – a natural right buttressed by convention, in the form of a U.N. resolution. Its modesty, of course, is deceptive. For Jews, the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel was an event of transcendent importance, ending an era not only of statelessness but also of extreme vulnerability. The Israeli Declaration references both of these facts: first, the fulfillment of an ancient promise that the homeland would be restored; and then the urgency revealed by the Holocaust. ([Continued on page 13](#))

Peter Pettit

The world reflected in Israel's Declaration was a very different place than we know today. The Declaration stands as a document of its time, evoking respect as we attempt a fair assessment, neither wishing for the unattainable nor second-guessing with the unfair advantage of hindsight. Like all founding documents, it invites us to understand its ideals, assessing the ways in which subsequent reality fulfilled them and the ways in which today's inheritors of the ideals may yet more fully achieve them. In its twelfth paragraph, the Declaration sets forth its core ideals; it is remarkable to consider how far Israel has embodied the accommodation of immigrants and the participation in the community of nations that are included there, particularly in light of the continuing state of war marking its life from the start. ([Continued on page 13](#))

David Ben-Gurion
 Daniel Auster Mordekhai Bentov Yitzchak Ben Zvi
 Eliyahu Berligne Fritz Bernstein Rabbi Wolf Gold
 Meir Grabovsky Yitzchak Gruenbaum Dr. Abraham Granovsky
 Eliyahu Dobkin Meir Wilner-Kovner Zerach Wahrhaftig
 Herzl Vardi Rachel Cohen Rabbi Kalman Kahana Saadia Kobashi
 Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levin Meir David Loewenstein Zvi Luria
 Golda Myerson Nachum Nir Zvi Segal Rabbi Yehuda Leib
 Hacoen Fishman David Zvi Pinkas Aharon Zisling
 Moshe Kolodny Eliezer Kaplan Abraham Katznelson
 Felix Rosenblueth David Remez Berl Repetur Mordekhai Shattner
 Ben Zion Sternberg Bekhor Shitreet Moshe Shapira Moshe Shertok

From

http://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm

Raymond Cohen (Continued from page 2)

In the circumstances, the declaration was less a detailed political manifesto than a call to arms, a claim to statehood, an appeal for international recognition, and an affirmation of faith. In besieged Jerusalem people danced in the streets. In its assurance of an eternal Israel it evokes the declaration to be enunciated by the priest on the eve of battle of Deuteronomy 20:3-4.

Hear O Israel, ye draw nigh this day unto battle against your enemies; let not your heart faint; fear not, nor be

Racelle Weiman

Almighty God and the Declaration of Independence of Israel

The Talmud extols the extraordinary teacher as a treasure. One of my cherished teachers was Ruth Goldschmidt Kunzer, a fiery professor with red hair and a British accent from the German Studies Department at UCLA, who taught the first university courses in the USA on Zionism, as well as the Holocaust. She was extraordinary in many ways; not least was the fact that she was present as the proverbial 'fly on the wall' during some of the greatest moments in modern Jewish history.

In the summer of 1975 I volunteered to live with her to help out with her husband, who was dying of cancer. During those warm summer nights in Los Angeles, Ruth shared her most significant memories. These were of the chaotic but exhilarating years serving as the English language secretary and aide to David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, and later his successor, Moshe Sharett (Shertok), the major architects of the State of Israel. [\(Continued on page 14\)](#)

alarmed, neither be ye affrighted at them; for the Lord your God is He that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

In one paragraph in broad brushstrokes the declaration sketches out the ideals of a democratic state, "freedom, justice and peace, as envisaged by the prophets of Israel," while promising "complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex." It guarantees "free-

dom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture.” But the envisaged constitution supposed to give these ideals concrete legal expression by October 1, 1948 still languishes, sixty years on, in a committee of the Israeli parliament.

The declaration of statehood is not a political program in the Tom Paine tradition of the Enlightenment for the simple reason that Zionism was never very interested in political theory as opposed to policy. At an ethical level it took the message of the prophets as its beacon. At a practical level it emphasized creating facts on the ground – bringing in immigrants, buying and settling land, planting orchards. The political issues of the day were always exhaustively debated by Zionist thinkers. But political and constitutional theory fell between the cracks.

As a result, the declaration is something of a patchwork of contrasts and even contradictions. Is this a secular or a sacred document? It is replete with biblical and messianic allusions. The “Rock of Israel” is evoked, but the divine promise of the land is omitted. The “redemption of Israel” is proclaimed, and this seems to refer to national rebirth, the ingathering of exiles, statehood, rebuilding Jerusalem, redemption of the land, and fructification of the desert. However, the text does not expand on what this implies in spiritual terms. After the Six-Day War this vacuum was filled by the national religious aspiration to settle the entire Land of Israel and ultimately to restore the Temple.

National and universal values also pull the text in different directions. It is unclear how the concept of a specifically Jewish state can be reconciled with the political rights of non-Jewish inhabitants of Israel in the event that the latter become a majority of the population. In addition, does freedom of religion and conscience not also imply freedom to change one’s religion?

The most resonant sentence in the entire document, against

the background of the Nazi holocaust, is the evocation of “the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.” Sixty years on I believe that Statehood has indeed transformed the conditions of Jewish existence. But many key questions remain open, including cultural identity, borders, the status of Jerusalem, and relations with the Palestinians.

As far as Christian-Jewish relations are concerned, no one in 1948 could imagine that Israel and the Holy See would eventually exchange ambassadors, as they did in 1994. Today the challenge is to normalize that relationship by finally concluding agreements on the bread and butter issues of visas for clerics and tax exemptions for Catholic institutions. With these obstacles out of the way, the two parties might then productively discuss deeper mutual questions of history, memory, and identity.

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Deborah Weissman (Continued from page 2)

1. The United States, rapidly after issuing its declaration of independence, produced a *constitution*, with a bill of rights. The State of Israel came into being without a constitution. Ben-Gurion was afraid of a struggle with the Orthodox parties, who he was sure would insist that the Jewish people already had an adequate constitution in the Torah. Besides, it could be argued, one of the world’s admirable democracies – Great Britain – had existed for centuries without a constitution.

However, what was ignored in this approach is that Britain had, over the centuries, developed strong traditions and stable institutions, safeguarding its democracy.

Many of us in Israel feel that although our democracy has managed to weather deep crises and threats of an existential nature – in terms of security, politics, the economy and a multicultural society – we do need a stronger legal bulwark to continue as a Jewish and democratic state. We are probably closer, on a parliamentary level, to achieving a constitution than we have been before, but because of the challenges we have already alluded to, the goal is not yet in sight.

2. After the first nineteen years of its existence, the State of Israel faced the challenge of the *territories* acquired (captured? conquered? liberated?) during the Six-Days War. The settlements were a major strategic blunder, calling into question the commitment of the Declaration to the values of “...freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel...” The majority of Israelis have given up on any dream of the greater Israel, although the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, with its dismantling of settlements, gave a mixed message. It showed that Israel was capable of withdrawal from settled territory, but brought in its wake an intolerable situation of constant rocket fire on the northern Negev. Another attempt at unilateral withdrawal, the infamous security barrier/fence/wall, may have lowered the incidence of terrorism, but it also has trampled Palestinian rights and further worsened Israel’s image in the world.

3. The most egregious contradiction to the Declaration lies in the second-class status of Israel’s *Arab citizens*. The Declaration has promised them “full and equal citizenship and due representation.” These have yet to be achieved. Although Arab Israelis compare favorably with the populations

of all the countries in the Arab world, a fairer comparison would be with Jewish Israelis, and there, they lag behind. The poorest communities in Israel, with the highest unemployment rates, are in the Arab sector. The percentages of pupils matriculating in high schools or finishing university degrees are much lower than in Jewish communities. Government budgets are not always distributed proportionally.

One of the most painful and, unfortunately, growing phenomena in Israel is Jewish racism, directed against Arabs. These questions will have to be addressed if Israel is to live up to the ideals articulated in its Declaration of Independence.

Rabbi Dr. Deborah Weissman, who lives in Jerusalem, is President of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

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James Bernauer (Continued from page 3)

Humanity continues to be enriched by the Jewish cultures spread throughout the world and these diverse groups witness to a Judaism that has its own independence apart from the State.

As a Roman Catholic, I am contrite over Christianity’s centuries-long persecution of the Jewish people who yearned for their own redemption as a people of God, who dreamt of a welcome among the nations of the world. Surely this contrition sparks in me a special understanding for the precarious situation of Israel and an unwillingness to apply a double standard to Israel’s political conduct. As an American, I feel pride that the United States recognized the State on the very first day of its existence. But I want my country to support an Israeli nation that celebrates more than mere independent existence. May it

be a people that regards the message of the Book of Books as a supreme gift but not as a substitute for a political constitution. And perhaps among America's most helpful contributions to contemporary Israel might be the example of its constitutional ambition to separate religion from politics and, in doing so, protect both domains.

Fundamentalist religious visions and groups pose a dangerous challenge to the political character of the Jewish State, to its very existence. I was shocked when, on a recent visit to Israel, a settler explained that the success of the settlers' efforts to expand the territory of Israel was in God's hands. "If we are destroyed in trying to do so, that was God's will."

The existence of Israel and the endurance of its humanistic aspirations are hopes for the Jewish people but also for all peoples. As Theodor Herzl expressed those hopes in his speech to the Third Zionist Congress (August 15, 1899): "We want to mount to a higher grade of civilization, to spread well-being abroad, to build new highways for the intercourse of peoples, and to forge an opening for the coming of social justice. And just as our beloved poet transformed his sorrows into songs, so upon the loom of our sufferings we shall weave progress for mankind whom we serve." While Israel's declaration of its national existence is to be celebrated, may Herzl's vision ever become more clearly the State's guiding light.

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Eugene Korn (Continued from page 3)

Israel has succeeded in realizing many of the goals articulated in the Declaration: From the ashes of Auschwitz, it brought dig-

nity and vitality to the Jewish people, developed from independence and the opportunity to assume responsibility for its own welfare. In sixty short years Israel has achieved prosperity, bringing a poor war-torn society to a standard of living equal to that of western European nations. Israel has become a world leader in scientific advancement and the hi-tech revolution. The country has absorbed millions of Jews from the four corners of the earth, including one million fleeing oppression from the totalitarian Soviet Union and fifty thousand black Jews from Ethiopia escaping starvation. The Jewish State is now home to nearly the majority of world Jewry and is the theater of a robust and phenomenally creative Jewish culture. Israel's leaders have developed a thriving pluralistic democracy where legal equality is guaranteed for all its citizens – Jewish, Christian, Muslim – amidst a Middle East filled with monistic societies and autocratic regimes that are largely intolerant and deeply distrustful of minorities.

Yet there are also paradoxes pointing to dreams unfulfilled. Amidst the prosperity, there is also spreading poverty. Unlike all other Middle East countries, the number of Christians in Israel is growing (from 35,000 in 1948 to 130,000 today), but Christians have not yet achieved social or economic equality. Seventy-seven percent of Israeli Arabs stated in a recent Harvard University poll that they would rather live in Israel than anywhere else in the world, yet many view Israel as a foreign entity in the Middle East. Israel needs to devote more resources to the welfare of Israeli Christians and Muslims.

Israel has built a strong army, but that has not brought peace within Israel's grasp. Tragically, the Declaration's vision of neighborly cooperation to build a flourishing Middle East has not been realized. On the contrary, Islamist extremism is rising throughout the region, and the political ascendancy of Hamas and Hezbollah, which are both committed to Israel's destruction, makes peace seem farther away than ever. Israel has in

voluntarily inherited responsibility for more than three million Palestinians, and is unable to find a way to reach a separation agreement with them that would protect its own safety and security.

All the while Israel's physical existence is threatened, its soul remains at risk: How long can Israelis strive to fight a moral war against an enemy that targets Israeli children and civilians? How can it continue to respect the human rights of enemies while in a state of perpetual war? And how long can Israelis continue to see the Image of God in all people when they are surrounded by vicious anti-Semitic propaganda?

As a Jewish nation, Israel represents the principle of difference in the middle of *Dar Al Islam*: Can the Middle East be a place of dignity and equality also for Jews and Christians? Can the stunning ideals of Micah and Isaiah shape the politics and life of all people in that violent region? Ultimately, that is what the Israeli-Arab conflict is about and why the battle is so great for Jews and Christians – indeed, for Muslims as well.

These are the great challenges that Israel faces. The country remains unredeemed, yet Israelis resolutely continue to strive to bring their flawed reality and imperfect lives closer to spiritual and moral redemption.

Jews and Christians around the world today have powerful reasons to be practical and spiritual partners to help realize the prophetic ideals of Micah and Isaiah. Both faiths are threatened by common enemies: the radical philosophies of secular materialism on one side, and forces of religious intolerance on the other. As partners, Jews and Christians can bear common witness to the presence of God and the validity of His covenant with the children of Abraham.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in Israel today.

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Ruth Lutt (Continued from page 4)

In *Notes on the Correct Way to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations drew a distinction between theological and political considerations, noting that Christians should strive to understand the deep religious significance of the land of Israel to Jews and Judaism, while interpreting the existence of the state of Israel according to principles of international law. Almost another twenty years later, in the *Joint Declaration* of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (2004), the Church restated its commitment to rejecting anti-Semitism and specifically cited anti-Zionism as a more recent form of the bias.

During this 60th anniversary of their country's founding, Israelis would do well to engage in a process of national self-evaluation and reflect upon how well they have lived up to the noble principles state in their *Declaration*. Such a reflection, however, is not a task for the Church, which should be self-critical before it presumes to be critical of Israel.

The Church's task, if it has one in the 60th anniversary year, might be to reflect upon how well it is living up to its own stated

understanding of Jews and the Jewish state. Having rightly proclaimed that the state of Israel is to be judged by the same principles of international law that every other legal country is judged by, the Church must discern whether these legal principles are applied in an even handed way. Or rather, is Israel held to uniquely high legal and moral standards and then routinely adjudged guilty of failing to meet them? And if this is the case – which the frequency and vigor of criticism leveled at Israel by certain of the social justice and other factions of the Church suggests – then the reason for this must be discerned. Might this excessive criticism be reflective of a fundamental failure to

fully embrace the principles declared more than forty years ago in *Nostra Aetate*?

The 60th Anniversary of the founding of Israel presents both Israelis and Catholics with unique and profound opportunities. Israel can engage in self-critical reflection and recommit to creating a nation that its ancient prophets might have envisioned. And the Church can likewise engage in soul searching self-criticism, and recommit to the objectives stated in its documents – rejection of anti-Semitism in all its forms, including excessive criticism, scrutiny and bias against the Jewish state.

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Leonard Greenspon (Continued from page 4)

Such descriptions do appear in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, and it is instructive to observe that the borders of the Land, and hence its extent, are not uniform throughout the biblical text. There are many factors to consider when accounting for such differences: chronology, ideology, origins, context, and

purposes are among a few of them. Moreover, while some biblical passages had specific historical circumstances in view, others clearly set their sights on an ideal configuration that had yet come to pass.

These distinctive features should not obscure the centrality that the Land of Israel held for the Hebrews/Israelites/Jews throughout the biblical period. Such a central position is also delineated when we consider how closely the People of Israel and the Land of Israel are linked. When Israel served God, the Land – including vegetation, crops, livestock, indeed every mountain and valley – participated in the people's good fortune: bounteous crops, propitious rains, large and healthy herds. Conversely, Israel's rejection of God led not only to the people's pain and suffering; crops failed, rivers dried out, the land was overrun with wild beasts, and well-ordered farms fell victim to randomly growing briars and thorns. The Land and People of Israel, and their respective fates, are inextricably bound – even if the precise boundaries of the Land are not decisively delineated.

Those Jews who accepted Jesus as their messiah, and the later generations of Jews and non-Jews who eventually established Christianity as a religion separate from Judaism, were heirs to these earlier ideas about Land and People. They did not reject this linkage, but – it is fair to say – they shifted their horizons and threw themselves into a universal mission that emphasized the similarities among peoples, thereby deemphasizing the relative importance of the Land of Israel and its People. I am looking at this from what I would call a descriptive stance, passing no judgment on whether or not what has come to be the Jewish view or the Christian view is somehow better or more authentic. What I do insist on is that fair-minded observers of Judaism take the time to fully comprehend what the Land of Israel, in both ideal and real formulations, has meant and continues to mean for Jews.

My insistence naturally extends to non-Jewish critics of the modern State of Israel, most of whom are undoubtedly sincere when they assert that their statements about a specific policy of a given government of Israel should not be equated with anti-Semitism. At the same time, such individuals must be sensitive to the feelings of many Jews, whose sense of connectedness with the Land is in no way diminished by the fact that they have chosen not to live there. Although it is clearly not obligatory – or even desirable – that non-Jews share the feelings of Jews about the Land of Israel, it is essential that support of Israel – the Israel of the Hebrew Bible and the Israel of the Declaration – be acknowledged by all who wish to carry out productive dialogue between Jews and Christians. In short, when everyone affirms the reality of the ideal, they can work towards the ideal of the reality.

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Ursula Rudnick (Continued from page 4)

Rather, I want to throw a spot-light on contemporary Protestant attitudes in Germany towards the State of Israel. *Dabru Emet*, a Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity, crafted by Jewish scholars and rabbis in 2000, states: "Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel." Looking at official statements from Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Germany, this seems to be true.

The first study on the relationship of Christians and Jews by the *Evangelical Church in Germany* from 1975 explicitly refers to

the importance of the land of Israel for the Jewish people, stating: "Jews have always lived in the land of Israel and in the Diaspora; complete realization of Jewish life has always been connected to the land."

The well-known declaration of the Rhineland-Synod from 1980 states: "the continuing existence of the Jewish people, its return to the promised land, and the establishment of the state of Israel are a sign of God's faithfulness to his people." This is one of the few statements that interpret the establishment of the state of Israel in theological categories. No other German declaration has gone that far. Most statements refrain from a theological interpretation, often rejecting any theological interpretation of contemporary events in history. Thus, the third study on Christians and Jews published by the *Evangelical Church in Germany* insists on a distinction between "the land as a gift of God and the secular state of Israel." Nevertheless, there is a consensus "that the State of Israel will find a secure peace within just borders." This consensus is shared by official representatives of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Germany. However, it is an official consensus which does not always seem to be heart-felt. Furthermore, an anti-Israeli undercurrent among church members has grown over the past decades. Increasingly, sympathy rests with those who are perceived as the victims in this conflict, the Palestinian people.

Empathy with Israeli suffering is often only expressed by Protestant fundamentalists, who are on the margin of the churches.

The challenge for those involved in Jewish-Christian relations lies in redressing this rising imbalance.

Prof. Dr. Ursula Rudnick, Professor of Theology at the Leibniz University in Hannover and General Secretary of 'Begegnungen – Christen und Juden,' Niedersachsen.

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And while in the wake of the Holocaust it seemed briefly that there would no longer be room for anti-Semitism in the civilized world – and possibly no pressing need for a Jewish state – recent trends in Europe and elsewhere show that the old fires were banked but not extinguished.

The existence of a Jewish state is therefore not just the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy; it would appear to be, even now, a practical and even an urgent necessity. There is no better evidence for this necessity than the agitation caused by the mere existence of Israel – and not just among Israel’s Arab and Muslim neighbors.

There is a certain *Christian* disquiet about Israel, even in America, where Jews have been safer than anywhere else in the Diaspora. This unease has always been there, sometimes under the surface, and it has been quietly building since the 1970s.

Lately it has come fully and aggressively into view among the mainline Protestant churches, whose official pronouncements leave no doubt that Israel is a nation whose very existence is now debatable – even regrettable. For many mainline Protestants, Israeli statehood was a mistake, an aberration; to them, the Zionist idea itself is abhorrent. As the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts has said, Zionism is a “crime against the Palestinian people” that is now over a hundred years old. The willingness of the mainline Protestant churches to demonize Israel and absolve the Arabs is by now notorious, and it is hard to find a charitable explanation for this bias.

So it would appear that the founders of modern Israel were right to think that the Jews needed their own state. The proof is

That so many people, in so many high places, are certain that they do not, and certain as well that the Jews would be better off if only they could once again be made stateless.

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Peter Pettit (Continued from page 5)

The State has invested itself deeply in serving those in need – by accommodating its immigrants at home, by responding generously and energetically to natural and human catastrophes elsewhere, and by unparalleled contributions to the technological progress that has widened human prosperity and flattened the world.

The intervening years emphasize two points for particular reflection. First, the Declaration’s insistent use of “*Eretz Israel*” to name the land ignored too much history and ambiguity about ownership and sovereignty over time; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs now wisely glosses the phrase with “Land of Israel, Palestine” on its web site. More extensively, the Declaration erects the Jewish state on the people’s “natural and historic right” and leans heavily on the historical for its justifying dynamic. This begs the question of a Jewish State, with its theological implications. The Jewish people of course always includes the secular, but it is never without the religious of all the Jewish movements. The religious reading of the compromise language of 1948 must find fuller expression in the State’s self-understanding and not only in bureaucratic pragmatics that respond only to coalition politics.

This dimension of Israel's character also challenges North American Christians, for whom the church-state separation of modernity has until recently been made too easy by a continuing Christian hegemony. No less than Israelis, we must be clearer about what constitutes the sacred element in national existence, albeit approaching the issue from quite a different experience. The distinction between peoplehood and statehood demands careful attention, as individuals draw identity from one and strive to fulfill a role as loyal subjects of the other, without pretending that the private/public distinction is adequate. My own Lutheran community should be offering its considerable resources of both experience and theology in negotiating these perilous paths, walking them together with Israel both as a faithful partner and a grateful fellow learner.

The Declaration still stands as a calling. Our strongest word should be one of encouragement for Israel to embody the openness, self-extension and risk-taking that its confidence engenders. Thereby we can look forward to greater fulfillment, when the State not only is based on prophetic vision but also stands as a prophetic sign of God's will for human society and its governance. *Ad meah v'esrim!*

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Racelle Weimann (Continued from page 6)

It was an electrifying time and Ruth, a Holocaust refugee, had a vivid eyewitness account of the writing of the Declaration of

Independence¹ that became the foundation of all law in the country. A rare female insider (only two women were signatories; Golda Meir (Meyerson) and Rachel Cohen), Ruth knew intimately about the two major issues that were problematic: the subject of borders, and the inclusion of a reference to God. Sixty years later, these two key issues still remain on Israel's agenda. But at the moment of nationhood, it was a real crisis up until the final moments, in the rush to make the pronouncement of the new State of Israel as soon as the British forces lowered their flag and ended the Mandate, and notably, before the coming of the Sabbath eve on May 14, 1948.

On the first issue, Ben Gurion or "B.G.," as she called him, made the decision to refrain from all reference to actual borders. But it was the second issue that proved his leadership and genius in his resolution of the dilemma about God in the Declaration. Ruth described the fundamental tension between the secularist and religious Jews. There were those who believed that such an important historical document in Jewish collective identity must include Elohim, HaKodesh Baruch Hu, – God – in the fulfillment of the 2,000 year prayer for the Ingathering of the Exiles and the Return to the Land. The secularist Jewish wing objected to any reference to God, believing that it was faith in the human spirit, in Jewish empowerment and self sufficiency, which made the reality of Jewish sovereignty possible. Ruth tells of B.G.'s compromise solution phrase of "Bitachon B'Tzur Yisrael" ("With trust in the 'Rock of Israel'") to satisfy each and every Jew. Refusing to put it to a vote, Ben Gurion delivered one of his most impassioned pleas to the assembly, in private, behind closed doors. He said that each person knows what he believes is the "Rock of Israel"² that an-

¹ *Megilat Atzmaout* in Hebrew is referred to as the [Scroll] Declaration of Independence.

chors the Jewish collective. As leader of the new entity, he was able to *embrace all Jews from their own understandings of faith, culture, belief, whatever is their 'mighty stronghold'* by offering a specifically Jewish answer – not either/or but this AND that..He created a national entity from the plethora of Jewish political, social, religious and ethnic groups from all corners of the globe. For Ruth, it also indicates the reality of the diversity and array of Jewish identities among the Jewish People, which is crucial for Jew and Gentile alike to acknowledge.

Ruth labored with Moshe Shertok long hours into the night hammering out a translation into English of this famous announcement to the rest of the nations of the world. Shertok thought to preserve the euphemistic “Rock of Israel” in the translation. It was Ruth, the self-proclaimed secularist and agnostic young secretary, who convinced Shertok that the English version should read “Placing our Trust in the Almighty.”³ Para-

doxically, even though she embraced the ingenuity of the “Rock of Israel’ solution for the coalition of new citizens of the State of Israel, she strongly believed that the Gentile world needed to understand the sanctity of this moment, and that God had not abandoned His people, nor they abandoned Him.

In the archives, I found a TIME magazine article of August 30, 1948 which spoke of the ‘girl at the typewriter’ who carried the day by including “the Almighty” in the new State of Israel’s Declaration of Independence, and was officially recorded in history in the Official Gazette No. 1, Tel Aviv, 5 Iyar, 5708, Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948.

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² In Jewish literature over the centuries, “Tzur Yisrael” has been used to refer to Eretz Yisrael, the *Land of Israel*; *Am Israel People of Israel*; and *Torat Israel-The Torah(Teachings and Culture)of Israel, as well as HaShem—God Almighty*.

³ The US Declaration of Independence refers to God, though the Constitution does not.