

“How can you defend Israel?”

David Harris, AJC Executive Director

December 27, 2010

I was sitting in a lecture hall at a British university. Bored by the speaker, I began glancing around the hall. I noticed someone who looked quite familiar from an earlier academic incarnation. When the session ended, I introduced myself and wondered if, after years that could be counted in decades, he remembered me.

He said he did, at which point I commented that the years had been good to him. His response: “But you’ve changed a lot.”

“How so?” I asked with a degree of trepidation, knowing that, self-deception aside, being 60 isn’t quite the same as 30.

Looking me straight in the eye, he proclaimed, as others standing nearby listened in, “I read the things you write about Israel. I hate them. How can you defend that country? What happened to the good liberal boy I knew 30 years ago?”

I replied: “That good liberal boy hasn’t changed his view. Israel is a liberal cause, and I am proud to speak up for it.”

Yes, I’m proud to speak up for Israel. A recent trip once again reminded me why.

Sometimes, it’s the seemingly small things, the things that many may not even notice, or just take for granted, or perhaps deliberately ignore, lest it spoil their airtight thinking.

It’s the driving lesson in Jerusalem, with the student behind the wheel a devout Muslim woman, and the teacher an Israeli with a skullcap. To judge from media reports about endless inter-communal conflict, such a scene should be impossible. Yet, it was so mundane that no one, it seemed, other than me gave it a passing glance. It goes without saying that the same woman would not have had the luxury of driving lessons, much less with an Orthodox Jewish teacher, had she been living in Saudi Arabia.

It’s the two gay men walking hand-in-hand along the Tel Aviv beachfront. No one looked at them, and no one questioned their right to display their affection. Try repeating the same scene in some neighboring countries.

It’s the Friday crowd at a mosque in Jaffa. Muslims are free to enter as they please, to pray, to affirm their faith. The scene is repeated throughout Israel. Meanwhile, Christians in Iraq are targeted for death; Copts in Egypt face daily marginalization; Saudi Arabia bans any public display of Christianity; and Jews have been largely driven out of the Arab Middle East.

It's the central bus station in Tel Aviv. There's a free health clinic set up for the thousands of Africans who have entered Israel, some legally, others illegally. They are from Sudan, Eritrea, and elsewhere. They are Christians, Muslims, and animists. Clearly, they know something that Israel's detractors, who rant and rave about alleged "racism," don't. They know that, if they're lucky, they can make a new start in Israel. That's why they bypass Arab countries along the way, fearing imprisonment or persecution. And while tiny Israel wonders how many such refugees it can absorb, Israeli medical professionals volunteer their time in the clinic.

It's Save a Child's Heart, another Israeli institution that doesn't make it into the international media all that much, although it deserves a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. Here, children in need of advanced cardiac care come, often below the radar. They arrive from Iraq, the West Bank, Gaza, and other Arab places. They receive world-class treatment. It's free, offered by doctors and nurses who wish to assert their commitment to coexistence. Yet, these very same individuals know that, in many cases, their work will go unacknowledged. The families are fearful of admitting they sought help in Israel, even as, thanks to Israelis, their children have been given a new lease on life.

It's the vibrancy of the Israeli debate on just about everything, including, centrally, the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians. The story goes that U.S. President Harry Truman met Israeli President Chaim Weizmann shortly after Israel's establishment in 1948. They got into a discussion about who had the tougher job. Truman said: "With respect, I'm president of 140 million people." Weizmann retorted: "True, but I'm president of one million presidents."

Whether it's the political parties, the Knesset, the media, civil society, or the street, Israelis are assertive, self-critical, and reflective of a wide range of viewpoints.

It's the Israelis who are now planning the restoration of the Carmel Forest, after a deadly fire killed 44 people and destroyed 8,000 acres of exquisite nature. Israelis took an arid and barren land and, despite the unimaginably harsh conditions, lovingly planted one tree after another, so that Israel can justifiably claim today that it's one of the few countries with more wooded land than it had a century ago.

It's the Israelis who, with quiet resolve and courage, are determined to defend their small sliver of land against every conceivable threat – the growing Hamas arsenal in Gaza; the dangerous build-up of missiles by Hezbollah in Lebanon; nuclear-aspiring Iran's calls for a world without Israel; Syria's hospitality to Hamas leaders and transshipment of weapons to Hezbollah; and enemies that shamelessly use civilians as human shields. Or the global campaign to challenge Israel's very legitimacy and right to self-defense; the bizarre anti-Zionist coalition between the radical left and Islamic extremists; the automatic numerical majority at the UN ready to endorse, at a moment's notice, even the most far-fetched accusations against Israel; and those in the punditocracy unable – or unwilling – to grasp the immense strategic challenges facing Israel.

Yes, it's those Israelis who, after burying 21 young people murdered by terrorists at a Tel Aviv discotheque, don the uniform of the Israeli armed forces to defend their country, and proclaim, in the next breath, that, "They won't stop us from dancing, either."

That's the country I'm proud to stand up for. No, I'd never say Israel is perfect. It has its flaws and foibles. It's made its share of mistakes. But, then again, so has every democratic, liberal and peace-seeking country I know, though few of them have faced existential challenges every day since their birth.

The perfect is the enemy of the good, it's said. Israel is a good country. And seeing it up close, rather than through the filter of the BBC or the Guardian, never fails to remind me why.