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Israel at 40

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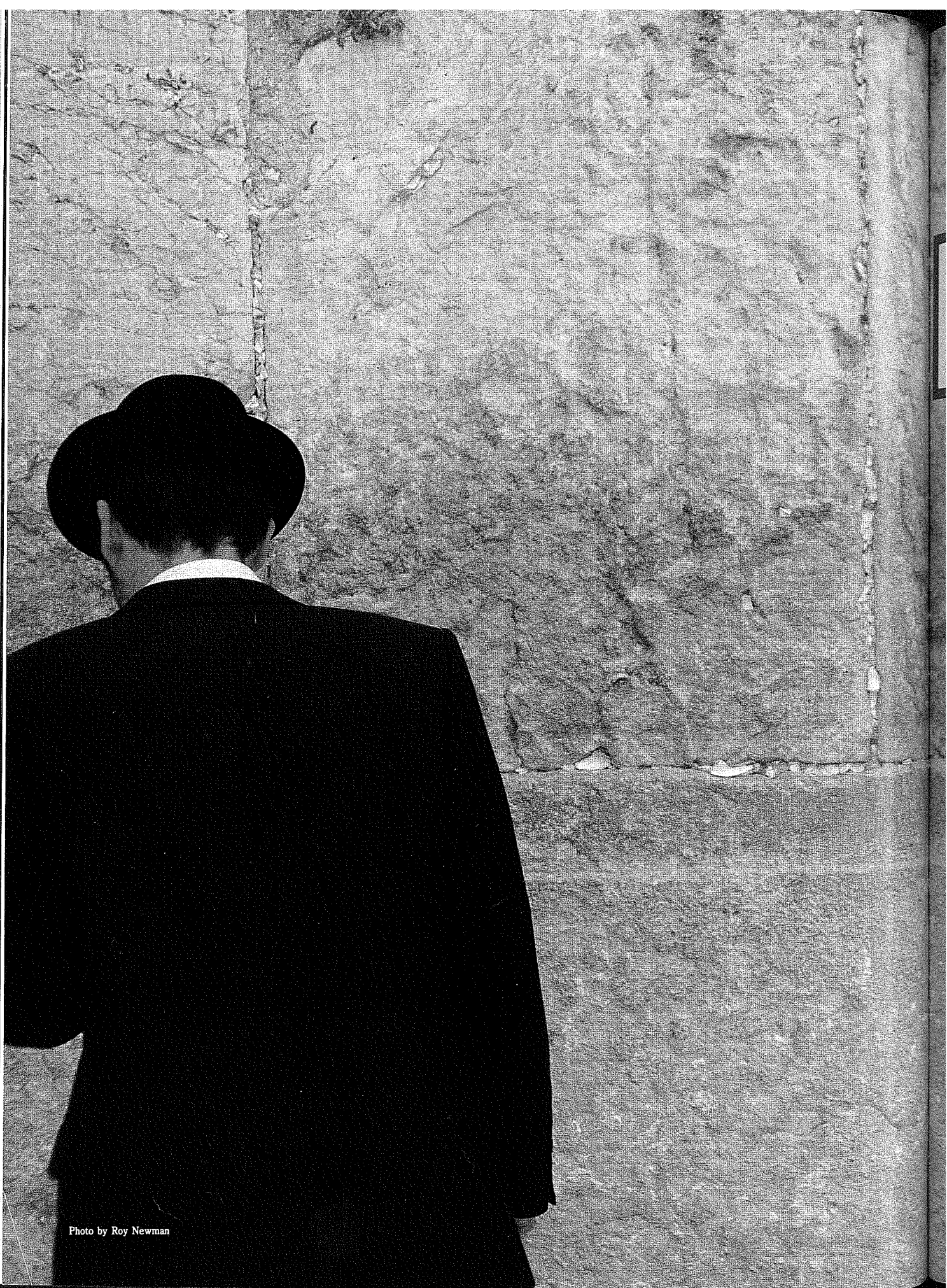


Photo by Roy Newman

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Israel

AT FORTY

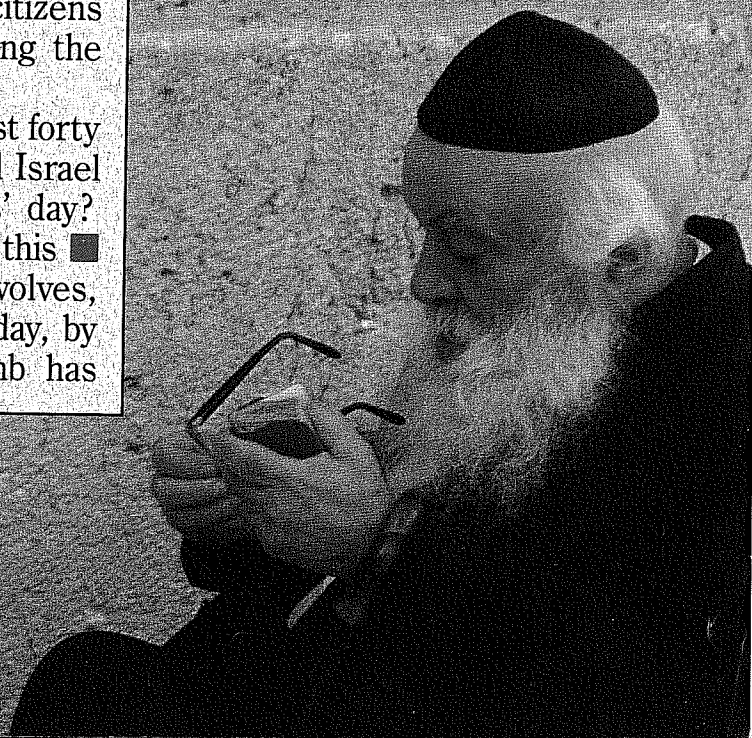
A compilation of excerpts from
the book by Harold L. Willmington
and Ray Pritz

The number forty has always been highly significant in biblical language: Israel ■ was forty years in the wilderness. Jesus fasted in the wilderness forty days.

From the day ■ of its seemingly miraculous birth forty years ago, the nation of Israel has undergone testings of all kinds. Still, despite threats by Arab neighbors to “push them into ■ the sea,” citizens of the proud nation of Israel thrive, causing the desert wasteland to literally bloom.

What in ■ Israel has changed in these last forty years? What is it like today? Is the restored Israel anything like the Israel of David's or Jesus' day?

The almost universal consensus was that this ■ tiny Israeli lamb, surrounded by mighty wolves, would never survive. But survive it did! Today, by any acceptable standard, the ■ little lamb has



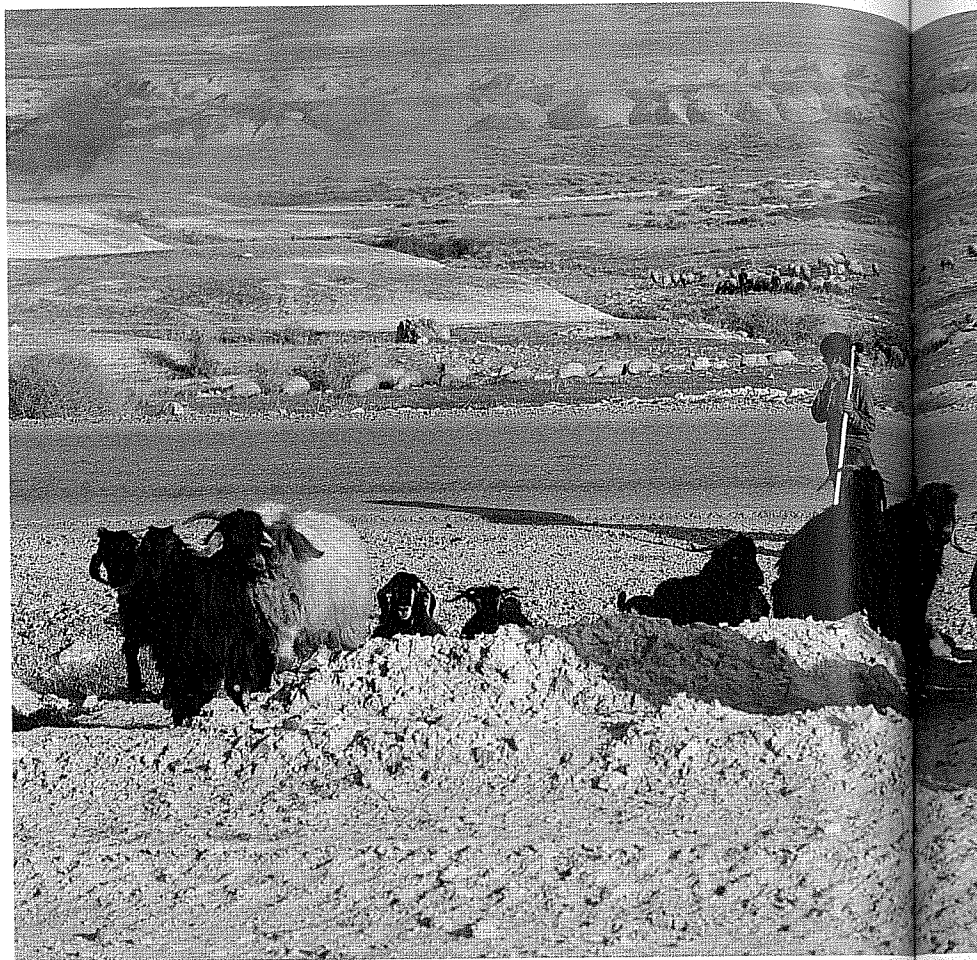
become a seasoned lion!

The language itself is a measure of the country and the people. No other nation in the world has been known to choose to put back into common use such a difficult language that was for centuries all but extinct. No other people would pursue its revival with such persistence and patriotic zeal. Bringing the language back into existence was quite an accomplishment. Some even question whether or not the pronunciation today bears any real resemblance to the language as it was spoken years ago. Someone has said, however, that "Israel without Hebrew would not really be Israel."

Israel is a land of struggle and of a struggling and persistent people, yet thousands attempt to immigrate yearly and take up the challenge of settling there. One can compare it in many ways to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America, where people from all nations and tongues came to a free land to enter into the struggle of establishing themselves. The commonality of those who seek Israeli soil today is, as much as anything else, the ethnic attraction, the realization of what it means to be a Jew and living on Jewish soil.

Some might find it incongruous to see a young American Jew with several academic degrees side by side with a young European Jew in their new land of freedom, both struggling with the nuances of an ancient Semitic language during a weekend military exercise as they learn to field strip their M16 rifles. Others would wonder at a "peace-loving" people who spend so many hours in military training and in clambering over miles of desert terrain in armored vehicles.

The boatloads and planeloads of people who crowded toward Israeli soil in the past decades came looking for role models, someone to teach them a new way of life in a new land. They found their role models in the Sabras, the native-born Israelis. The Sabras were mostly veterans of the early kibbutzim, which were so successful in making, through their spectacular agricultural feats, the "desert . . . rejoice and bloom as a rose" (Isa. 35:1). The hardness of their lives and their diligence set the pace for all those who came to join them. Their quiet ridicule of the softness of the newcomers, and their wincing at the accents of people trying to speak their newly acquired Hebrew, spurred the newcomers on to learn it better. Someone



with several academic degrees would be considered illiterate if he didn't speak Hebrew well. Their casual dress made the man's tie obsolete, even on the floor of the Knesset.

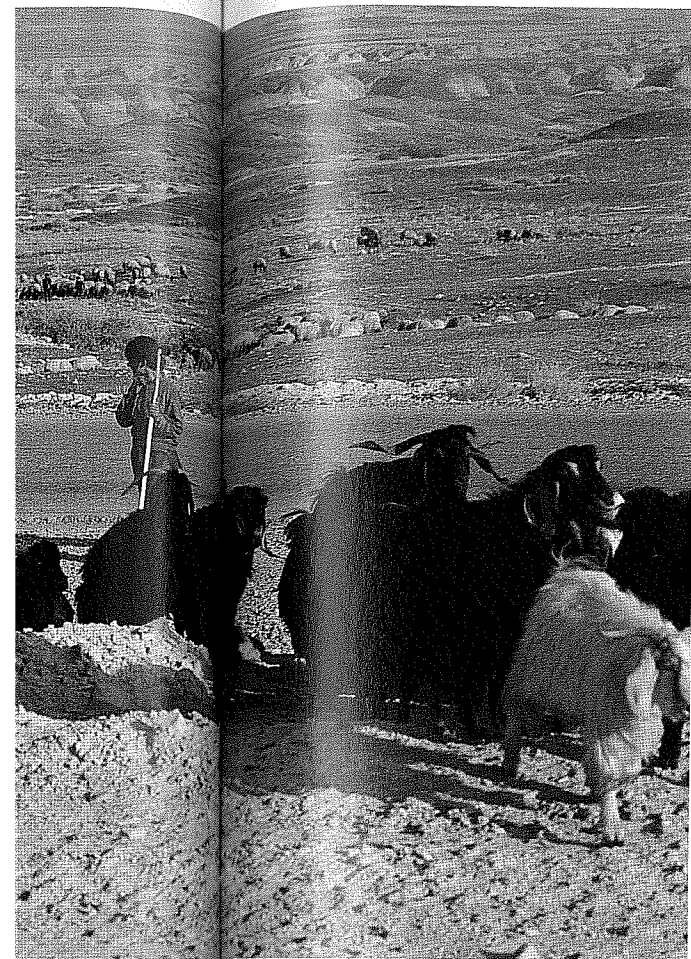
Education is relevant only as it applies to Jewishness and temporal relevance. While they might teach their young people every nook and cranny of Israeli soil, the student might never learn to find the Virgin Islands on a map.

The commonality of those who seek Israeli soil today is the realization of what it means to be a Jew and living on Jewish soil.

According to 1986 figures, Israel has a combined population of 4.2 million. Of this number 82.9 percent are Jews, 13.5 percent Muslim, 2.3 percent Christian, and 1.3 percent Druze. Israel's population is small compared to all of her fourteen Arab neighbors, who have a combined total of nearly 160 million. Compared to 4,578,000 square miles of her neighbors, Israel's land area is only 7,992 square miles.

Most of the citizens live in cities and suburbs along the coastline, from Haifa in the north to Ashkelon in the south. City streets are generally crime-free and safe, and supermarkets, movie houses, and restaurants abound. Nightlife might compare favorably with any city on the Mediterranean. The densest inland settlement is around Jerusalem. Tel Aviv and its suburbs account for about 500,000 of the nation's people.

Life in Israel is an ever-changing panorama, a strange blend of the old and the new. Sometimes staying alive can depend on how agile and resourceful one can be. The nation exists despite the volatile political environment, a territory



figures, Israel has a population of 4.2 million. Of these, 75 percent are Jews, 13.5 percent Christian, and 11.5 percent Arab. Israel's population is projected to reach 6 million by the year 2000. The country's total area is only 20,000 square miles of which only 5,000 are arable.

As of 1984, 75 percent of the population lives in cities and towns, from Haifa in the north to Beersheva in the south. The country is generally crime-free and has a high standard of living. Nightlife might be found in any city on the coast, but the densest inland settlements are in Jerusalem. Tel Aviv accounts for about 20 percent of the country's population.

Israel is an ever-changing blend of the old and the new. The country is a mix of staying alive and resourcefulness. It exists despite the constant threat of terrorism, a territory

surrounded by tense Arab nations and with sometimes hostile Palestinians in their midst. An angry look or misunderstood gesture or a shouted slogan could turn a peaceful street scene into a war zone. The description of this land, given by the ten fearful spies sent out by Moses, with Joshua and Caleb, was, "This is a land that devours its inhabitants." This description could be considered as still being true of Israel. It is a land where no one takes peace for granted.

Someone described an Israeli citizen as a soldier who happens to be on a lengthy furlough. Almost all citizens—men and single women—serve their time in conscription and remain in military reserve units for most of their lifetime.

Zahal, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), is perhaps the world's most amazing citizen army. It permeates all aspects of national life. At the age of eighteen, both males and females (with a few exceptions) are conscripted—the men for three years, the women for two years.

Unlike most nations, Israel's military survival depends not so much on the

regular army as it does on the number of trained reservists the country can muster during periods of national emergency. Indeed, IDF military doctrine invests the standing army with the task of merely holding off an attack until the reserves can be mobilized. The Institute [International Institute for Strategic Studies in London] estimates the total number of reservists in Israel at 504,000 men. Of them, 400,000 can be called up within forty-eight hours.

Israel in the 1980s has had one of the highest inflation rates in the world. It reached higher than 1,000 percent near the end of 1984 and continued to go higher by the day. It took forty-five times as many shekels to buy a given product in 1984 as it did four years before. The cost of living in Israel was rising at a rate of about 25 percent per month!

As the economy deteriorated more rapidly after 1977, the new government adopted a policy of more frequent "mini-devaluations" of only 2 or 3 percent in order to avoid the panic hoarding psychology. This policy, in turn, gave way to a system whereby the exchange rates for the Israeli currency was adjusted daily to try to keep up with the inflation.

Israelis pay the highest personal income tax in the world, and almost everything is taxed beyond that. A self-employed Israeli will pay 40 to 45 percent tax on his earnings under \$1,000 monthly. On income above \$1,000 he will pay perhaps 60 percent tax. When he takes his earnings and rushes out to spend it before the inflation rate cuts its value, he may pay as much as 15 percent sales tax on any item he buys, which means the government received at least half of what he earned.

Israel is the only country ■ where a Christian minority lives among ■ a Jewish majority—a unique fact in world history ■ since the first century A.D.

How then can families survive? Most families have at least two wage earners or they wouldn't survive. About 500,000 women work, many of them mothers of young children. Children stay in daycare centers, or an older woman, someone who would be otherwise unemployable, will be hired as a regular baby-sitter.

In a nation of ever-rising tax and import duties, an automobile might be taxed as much as 350 percent of its original value. Inflation makes price tags meaningless from day to day. Compared with other nations, salaries often seem to have no relation to one's occupation. An automobile mechanic may earn more than a white collar worker or a government official, and a plumber may earn twice what a doctor or university professor receives.

As of September 1984 more than 5.5 percent of Israel's work force has been unemployed, and the figures grow worse. The average family among salaried breadwinners numbers 3.8 people, of which 1.6 are unemployed. The average family income derives 68 percent from the husband's earnings, 17 percent from the wife's, and the rest from other family member's earnings. Only 42 percent of households own a car, and 56 percent of the self-employed own vehicles.

A sobering analysis of the political implications of Israel's inflation was given recently in the *Jerusalem Post* by Dr. Manfred Gerstenfeld, one of the heads of the Euroteam firm of financial consultants. Commenting on whether or not democracy can survive Israel's inflation, he replied, "Possibly, but so far no democracy has survived when inflation ran at more than 100 percent for a long time."

Although inflation ran even higher, Israel managed to stay democratic mainly due to its linkage system by which rises in the cost of living were matched by government benefits given back to workers. In other words, salaries were linked to the cost-of-living index. On the one hand, the linkage system accelerated inflation, sending prices higher and higher. But linkage prevented the distortions between various groups of the population from becoming too significant. According to Gerstenfeld, this imbalance had grown considerably in strength. On the one hand, the average Israeli wanted permanent status at his place of work, as is the rule in Communist countries. But on the other hand, he also demanded the right to strike, as if he were living in a capitalist country.

"No democratic government can guarantee employment for everybody in the same job all his life," Gerstenfeld said.

In July 1985 the new so-called "National Unity" government began to tackle the task for which it had been created—to bring down inflation and to improve the economic situation. Among other steps, it effectively froze the value of the shekel at a rate of 1,500 to the dollar. Prices and wages were also frozen and carefully checked, with heavy fines dished out to anyone who tried to effect unauthorized rises.

For the first time in years, Israelis began to feel what it was like to have prices stay the same for weeks at a time. People stopped checking the papers every day to see what the dollar rate of exchange was. It still fluctuated, but now it fluctuated in both directions, and it always stayed a little bit below 1,500 to the dollar. In August 1985 the government announced that the old shekel would be replaced with a new shekel worth 1,000 of the old. Israel had been through this exercise before when the change was made from the lira (pound) to the old shekel. The change actually went into effect on January 1, 1986. By that time there were good indications that the government's measures were having a positive effect on inflation. In the last months of the year, the inflation ran at a monthly rate of well under 10 percent and the annual rate dropped in January by 1.3 percent, the lowest in 17 years. For the previous three months, the annual rate was about 2 percent.

Many are still skeptical that things will stay stable after the tight price controls are relaxed, but a spirit of optimism is certainly discernible from the man on the street. If success in this area should come, Israel will at least have accomplished something that has never been done before.

The government of the modern State of Israel was based on the British model, with just a touch of ancient Jewish tradition. Unlike England or the United States, Israel has only one legislative house, the Knesset. Like the so-called "Great Knesset," of which Ezra the scribe was said to be the head, the Knesset consists of 120 members. Technically they are elected in a popular vote of all adult citizens at least once every four years. In actuality, Israelis do not vote for individuals but for parties. Each party puts forward a list of candidates, up to 120, and then the ballot contains the

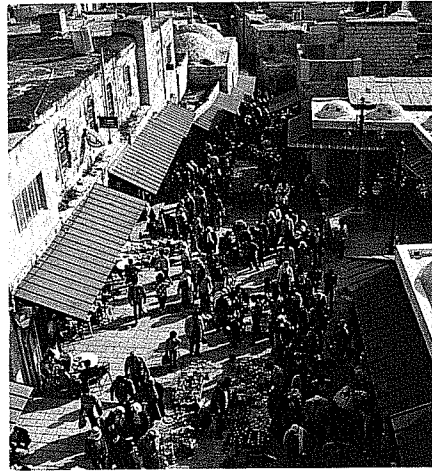


Photo courtesy of the Israel Government Tourist Office

In the Middle East everyone is ■ born with a religion. That a person "decides" to ■ become a Christian is a very strange concept for the average Israeli or Arab.

name of the party. The candidates on a party's list are in a numerical order of priority, so, for example, if a party receives enough votes for ten seats in the Knesset, number eleven on its list goes looking for another job.

The number one man on the winning party's list will be the prime minister. The prime minister has the option of calling elections at any time he sees fit for no other reason than that he might think it an opportune time for his own party to improve its position in the Knesset. If no election has been held for four years, then it is automatic that one be held.

Israel of the 1980s is a land of marked contrasts, and this is as true of the church in Israel as it is of politics and other areas of daily living.

The total number of "Christians" in Israel today is roughly 147,000. This total includes both believing and nominal

Christians, Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox and is less than 4 percent of the overall population. As the only country in the world with a Jewish majority, Israel is, of course, the only country where a Christian minority lives among a Jewish majority—a unique fact in world history since the first century A.D.

The largest religious communities are the oldest, and the largest of these is the Catholic, which is subdivided into Greek Catholic (or Melkite), Latin (Roman) Catholic, and Maronite. There are about 87,000 Catholics within these groups. In the early nineteenth century the Orthodox church accounted for 80 percent of the Christian population of the Holy Land. Today they are less than 25 percent. The Orthodox churches are proud of the fact that through nineteen centuries they carried the name "Christian" and preserved that name in the land during times of hardship and persecution.

The Protestants of Israel make up less than 15 percent of the total Christian population, or less than one-half of 1 percent of the total population of the country. Among those Protestants, probably 70 percent would have to be classified as nominal Christians. To complete the fractured picture, out of the entire Christian community in Israel, there are more than sixty separate denominations, most of these, of course, among the Protestants.

The name "Christian" does not carry all the same connotations in the Middle East that it does in the United States. In the Middle East everyone is born with a religion. The communities are religious communities, and thus every child is born into one of these religious communities. That a person "decides" to become a Christian is a very strange concept for the average Israeli or Arab.

This cultural difference has perhaps been brought to light more in recent years with the news of the factional fighting in Lebanon. Western Christians were undoubtedly shocked to hear that hundreds of Palestinians in two refugee camps in Beirut were systematically murdered by Christian Falange forces. The event itself was, of course, shocking enough, but the whole report took on an added sting in the juxtaposition of the words *Christian* and *massacre*.

Many well-meaning evangelical tourists have been totally misled by the

continued on page 34



"Less than five years ago in the nation of China, a nation that is closed to the gospel by the Communists, there were only about one million Chinese out of one billion Chinese who knew the Lord Jesus as Saviour. But a Great Awakening has swept across China and today, it is said conservatively, there are 50 million Chinese that have been saved in a five year period"

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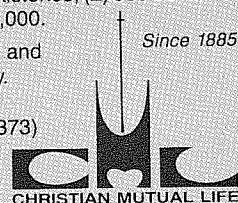


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cultural difference in the definitions of the term *Christian*. Walking into a shop in Jerusalem's Old City, a tourist asks the salesman, "Are you a Christian?" Flashing a big smile, the salesman gives an affirmative reply. That salesman may never have made a decision for Christ, but within his cultural context he is being totally honest. In addition, he will surely know that the right answer will be good for business. Many stories could be told about merchants exploiting the spiritual gullibility or naivete of Christian customers.

Tour guides usually get well acquainted with the people on the tour bus during the course of an intensive week or more. Every tour guide in Israel has encountered countless would-be evangelists, and most have heard the gospel in one form or another many times. (The same can be said to a lesser degree of the bus drivers.) Each guide must learn to accept this as one of the hazards of the job, or refuse to work with evangelical groups. A few guides, however, have learned to turn this religious zeal to their financial profit. If they time it right, they will "have a conversion experience" a couple of days before the end of the tour, just in time to be baptized in the Jordan River or the Sea of Galilee. The announcement of the decision of the guide or driver brings waves of goodwill over the group, which is further reinforced by the baptism. It follows that tips and extra personal gifts are substantially increased. One Muslim guide, at last count, has been baptized twenty times.

The nation of Israel has a life all its own, one that has developed from the struggles and opposition its people have faced from their neighbors. Israelis see themselves as different, but no better or worse than other people of the world. Perhaps, however, they have fewer hang-ups about themselves and are more eager to live with the differences than most others.

Their often-quoted slogan, "Never Again," could apply to more than just the Holocaust of Europe. It could mean also that never again will they be a nation without a land, a people without a place to be.

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