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Ancient Wisdom: I Was There when Modern Israel Was Born

Living in Poland in 1924, my grandfather was assaulted and called a ‘dirty Jew.’ He came home beaten and bleeding and told his family: Pack your bags—we are going home. Home, of course, was Israel.

JUDEA PEARL SITS BETWEEN HIS MOTHER, TOVA (FOREGROUND), AND HIS AUNT CHANA (BACKGROUND IN FRONT OF THEIR ORANGE HARVEST IN 1939. (COURTESY OF AUTHOR)

By Judea Pearl

When I speak at schools or synagogues, students often ask me, “Are you a Holocaust survivor?”

I answer, “No. I am a redemption survivor—a member of an almost extinct generation that witnessed Jewish rebirth and redemption.” If

they ask me to explain, I don't begin with history. I begin with a song. It is a Hanukkah song we learned in kindergarten, sung by Zionist pioneers in the 1940s:

> No miracle happened to us.
> We found no vessel of oil.
> We carved the rock till we bled.
> And there was light.

That song embodies the hard-won, heroic spirit of the generation that struggled to make the founding of Israel possible. Yet my own childhood was, in truth, remarkably carefree—at least for awhile.

I was born in 1936 in Bnei Brak, then a small town seven miles northeast of Tel Aviv. My grandfather helped found it in 1924 together with a handful of Polish-born Hasidic Jews. Family lore tells that one day, back in Poland, he was assaulted by a peasant and called a "dirty Jew." He came home beaten and bleeding and told his wife and children: Pack your bags—we are going home.

And so they did. A group of 26 Jewish families that included my father and grandfather bought a piece of arid land in Eretz Israel—in what was then called Mandatory Palestine, controlled by the British—near a tiny Arab village called Ibn Ibrak. They moved there with a new vision in mind: to rebuild an ancient Biblical town mentioned in the Passover Haggadah as a center of Jewish learning, which they viewed as the cradle of their historical birthplace.

Like everyone in Israel of my generation, I grew up as a "New Jew." That meant a well-fed, happy child who believed he belonged exactly where he stood—enjoying the world his nation was rebuilding, shielded from the darker chapters of Jewish history. Those belonged to the past—not to our lives.

Life, in other words, was good. Even the British soldiers were “good” to us, in the strange logic of childhood. They let us play with bullets while they cleaned their guns on the pavement. Yes, there were curfews and occasional searches, but they carefully returned every glass to the cupboard—in the best tradition of His Majesty King George VI. The Arab children were also “good” to us. We played together in the orange groves, rode their donkeys, and competed on the soccer field.

Judea Pearl is seen in Bnei Brak, early 1940s. (Courtesy of author)

By the time I was 9 or 10, it had become more difficult to live carefree as a Jewish child in Bnei Brak. Anxiety seeped into every household in our town. Every family had relatives who had perished in the Holocaust or were stranded in displaced-persons camps. The radio was constantly broadcasting names of survivors searching for loved ones. Day and night, it begged: “So-and-so from the city of so-and-so is searching for anyone who has information about his family.”

The first crack in our innocence came not from newspapers, but from children our age.

New children began arriving in our classrooms—refugees from Europe. They walked differently. They spoke differently. And we, the “New Jews,” were cruel to them, because they were not like us.

Only much later did we learn what those children had endured. The British navy, bowing to Arab pressure, had imposed a blockade to keep Jewish refugees from coming to Israel. Having lost their families in the death camps, the children came anyway, some carried ashore—literally—on shoulders, from ships that tried to break the blockade.

Not yet even a teenager, I did not fully understand what was happening. But I could read the newspaper headlines, which depicted increasing hostilities between Jewish and Arab communities, increasing clashes between the British authorities and the Jewish underground, and growing diplomatic tension between the Jewish leadership and their Arab counterparts in the days leading to a critical United Nations vote on the partition of Palestine into two states—Jewish and Arab. We read, for example, that Azzam Pasha (secretary-general of the Arab League) was threatening us with “rivers of blood and a monumental massacre” if the UN voted for partition.

Suddenly, the world seemed to be balancing on a knife’s edge.

On the night of November 29, 1947, no one slept. I challenge you to find a Jew of my generation who does not remember the color of the radio he listened to as he awaited the result of the UN vote on the partition of Palestine.

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Our entire town was on its feet as one human shadow, standing together, rich and poor, friend and foe, waiting for a verdict to be read by the presiding Brazilian delegate, who counted the votes alphabetically, from "Afghanistan—No" to "Yugoslavia—Abstain."

When the vote was announced—33 countries in favor, 13 against—my father shouted:

"It's over! It's over! Don't you understand—it's all over!" He grabbed me and repeated it again and again. I sensed both joy and anger in his voice—joy at the moment, anger at my inability to grasp it.

“But of course, it’s over,” I said. “We’re going to have a state. What’s the big deal?”

That was the moment a giant wall between us collapsed.

I had been raised “normal.” He had not. He knew what it meant to be a Jew in Poland. I did not.

That night, I understood for the first time that the freedom into which I was born is not something to be taken for granted. And he understood, perhaps for the first time, what it means to grow up free, unscarred by the fears he had known as a 14-year-old boy in Eastern Europe.

But celebration lasted only a short time. Everyone knew the vote was only the beginning.

Looking back, the creation of Israel was not a single miracle, but a convergence of many. Each “yea” vote in the United Nations was a small miracle, requiring a tremendous amount of courage, diplomacy, and persuasion—history I explore at length in my recent book, *Coexistence and Other Fighting Words*. In the U.S., for example, Eddie Jacobson, President Harry Truman’s former business partner, pestered Truman to meet Chaim Weizmann, the force behind the Zionist diplomacy who would later become Israel’s first president.

He faced intense opposition from within his own administration. His secretary of state, George Marshall, warned him against supporting the Zionist cause. Yet Truman persisted and personally instructed the U.S. delegation to vote yes. Later on, in 1948, it took him only 11 minutes to recognize the State of Israel after its declaration.

Chaim Pearl and his family are seen in 1933: Back row, L to R, Judea's aunts Esther and Chana, and his father, Eliezer. Front row, L to R, Judea's grandfather Chaim, his uncle, Akiva, his grandmother Chaya Rosa, and his aunt Batya (Courtesy of author)

My second hero is the Yishuv—the Jewish community in Mandatory Palestine. In 1917, there were barely 60,000 Jews in the land—about 6 percent of the population. That is hardly a basis for statehood.

What changed everything was not a speech but a transformation: from 60,000 to 600,000 by 1947. A tenfold increase. A society built from the ground up—agriculture, industry, institutions—united toward a better future.

The tractors of the villages in the Jezreel Valley were as decisive as the speeches in New York. The infrastructure built by the Yishuv impressed the United Nations delegations and made the idea of a state not just desirable but viable and compelling.

This is an essential point that is often forgotten. Israel was not created with the declaration in 1947. It was already there—waiting. It had been built in the preceding decades, field by field, road by road, institution by institution.

And then came May 14, 1948, when at 4 p.m., David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the State of Israel. We children sensed something was happening, but we did not grasp its magnitude. We were told to stay close to home because “times are not the same.” We “normal Jews” didn’t give these warnings much attention.

The next day, reality arrived. Egyptian warplanes bombarded our town.

We huddled under a staircase. A neighbor opened the door and said: “It will get much worse—but we will prevail.”

We could not imagine how it could get worse than shaking under trembling buildings and flying ricochets. But it did. A neighbor’s 19-year-old son returned in a coffin. His mother stood by the window for years, waiting for him to come back. Six thousand dead—1 percent of the population. Mostly young men. Boys from our own neighborhood. That was the price of independence.

The war also had devastating effects on our childhood Arab friends. One day, they simply did not show up to play.

“I did not survive destruction. I survived resurrection,” writes Judea Pearl. (UCLA Samueli School of Engineering)

When we went to their village, we found it deserted—chickens and goats still in their barns, houses intact yet abandoned, no sign of bullets anywhere. Only later, as an adult, I found out that the Haganah, the Jewish paramilitary force, had given the village elders assurances that if they did not join hostile forces, they would be protected. Somehow they lost trust in the agreement and fled, possibly heeding rumors of Jewish atrocities. Such rumors were routinely fabricated and spread by local Arab leaders in an attempt to convince neighboring Arab countries to come to their aid.

The establishment of Israel did more than create a state. It empowered a scattered tribe of beggars and peddlers to lift itself from the margins of history and create a world center of art, science, and entrepreneurship. Most of all, it elevated the standing of every Jew worldwide and continues to sustain and reinforce the cohesive identity of the Jewish collective everywhere.

That is what I mean when students ask me if I am a Holocaust survivor.

I did not survive destruction.

I survived resurrection.

And that is what I mean when I sing:

> We carved the rock—
> and there was light.

My generation has learned that redemption is not a miracle, as told in legends.It is carved—patiently, painfully—by human hands. And only then—the light appears.

This has been Ancient Wisdom, our series in which writers over 70 tell us how they are aging gracefully. In case you missed it, last week, Deborah Szekely, 103, described how she became "godmother of wellness."

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