

# What Christians Don't Know About Israel

*By G. Halsell*

American Jews sympathetic to Israel dominate key positions in all areas of our government where decisions are made regarding the Middle East. This being the case, is there any hope of ever changing U.S. policy? President Bill Clinton as well as most members of Congress support Israel-and they know why. U.S. Jews sympathetic to Israel donate lavishly to their campaign coffers. .

The answer to achieving an even-handed Middle East policy might lie elsewhere-among those who support Israel but don't really know why. This group is the vast majority of Americans. They are well-meaning, fair-minded Christians who feel bonded to Israel-and Zionism-often from atavistic feelings, in some cases dating from childhood.

I am one of those. I grew up listening to stories of a mystical, allegorical, spiritual Israel. This was before a modern political entity with the same name appeared on our maps. I attended Sunday School and watched an instructor draw down window-type shades to show maps of the Holy Land. I imbibed stories of a Good and Chosen people who fought against their Bad "unChosen" enemies.

In my early 20s, I began traveling the world, earning my living as a writer. I came to the subject of the Middle East rather late in my career. I was sadly lacking in knowledge regarding the area. About all I knew was what I had learned in Sunday School.

And typical of many U.S. Christians, I somehow considered a modern state created in 1948 as a homeland for Jews persecuted under the Nazis as a replica of the spiritual, mystical Israel I heard about as a child. When in 1979 I initially went to Jerusalem, I planned to write about the three great monotheistic religions and leave out politics. "Not write about politics?" scoffed one Palestinian, smoking a waterpipe in the Old Walled City. "We eat politics, morning, noon and night!"

As I would learn, the politics is about land, and the co-claimants to that land: the indigenous Palestinians who have lived there for 2,000 years and the Jews who started arriving in large numbers after the Second World War. By living among Israeli Jews as well as Palestinian Christians and Muslims, I saw, heard, smelled, experienced the police state tactics Israelis use against Palestinians.

My research led to a book entitled Journey to Jerusalem. My journey not only was enlightening to me as regards Israel, but also I came to a deeper, and sadder, understanding of my own country. I say sadder

understanding because I began to see that, in Middle East politics, we the people are not making the decisions, but rather that supporters of Israel are doing so. And typical of most Americans, I tended to think the U.S. media was "free" to print news impartially.

"It shouldn't be published. It's anti-Israel."

In the late 1970s, when I first went to Jerusalem, I was unaware that editors could and would classify "news" depending on who was doing what to whom. On my initial visit to Israel-Palestine, I had interviewed dozens of young Palestinian men. About one in four related stories of torture.

Israeli police had come in the night, dragged them from their beds and placed hoods over their heads. Then in jails the Israelis had kept them in isolation, besieged them with loud, incessant noises, hung them upside down and had sadistically mutilated their genitals. I had not read such stories in the U.S. media. Wasn't it news? Obviously, I naively thought, U.S. editors simply didn't know it was happening.

On a trip to Washington, DC, I hand-delivered a letter to Frank Mankiewicz, then head of the public radio station WETA. I explained I had taped interviews with Palestinians who had been brutally tortured. And I'd make them available to him. I got no reply. I made several phone calls. Eventually I was put through to a public relations person, a Ms. Cohen, who said my letter had been lost. I wrote again. In time I began to realize what I hadn't known: had it been Jews who were strung up and tortured, it would be news. But interviews with tortured Arabs were "lost" at WETA.

The process of getting my book *Journey to Jerusalem* published also was a learning experience. Bill Griffin, who signed a contract with me on behalf of MacMillan Publishing Company, was a former Roman Catholic priest. He assured me that no one other than himself would edit the book. As I researched the book, making several trips to Israel and Palestine, I met frequently with Griffin, showing him sample chapters. "Terrific," he said of my material.

The day the book was scheduled to be published, I went to visit MacMillan's. Checking in at a reception desk, I spotted Griffin across a room, cleaning out his desk. His secretary Margie came to greet me. In tears, she whispered for me to meet her in the ladies room. When we were alone, she confided, "He's been fired." She indicated it was because he had signed a contract for a book that was sympathetic to Palestinians. Griffin, she said, had no time to see me.

Later, I met with another MacMillan official, William Curry. "I was told to take your manuscript to the Israeli Embassy, to let them read it for mistakes," he told me. "They were not pleased. They asked me, 'You are not going to publish this book, are you?' I asked, 'Were there mistakes?' 'Not mistakes as such. But it shouldn't be published. It's anti-Israel.'"

Somehow, despite obstacles to prevent it, the presses had started rolling. After its publication in 1980, I was invited to speak in a number of churches. Christians generally reacted with disbelief. Back then, there was little or no coverage of Israeli land confiscation, demolition of Palestinian homes, wanton arrests and torture of Palestinian civilians.

### **The Same Question**

Speaking of these injustices, I invariably heard the same question, "How come I didn't know this?" Or someone might ask, "But I haven't read about that in my newspaper." To these church audiences, I related my own learning experience, that of seeing hordes of U.S. correspondents covering a relatively tiny state. I pointed out that I had not seen so many reporters in world capitals such as Beijing, Moscow, London, Tokyo, Paris. Why, I asked, did a small state with a 1980 population of only four million warrant more reporters than China, with a billion people?

I also linked this query with my findings that The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post-and most of our nation's print media-are owned and/or controlled by Jews supportive of Israel. It was for this reason, I deduced, that they sent so many reporters to cover Israel-and to do so largely from the Israeli point of view.

My learning experiences also included coming to realize how easily I could lose a Jewish friend if I criticized the Jewish state. I could with impunity criticize France, England, Russia, even the United States. And any aspect of life in America. But not the Jewish state. I lost more Jewish friends than one after the publication of Journey to Jerusalem-all sad losses for me and one, perhaps, saddest of all.

In the 1960s and 1970s, before going to the Middle East, I had written about the plight of blacks in a book entitled Soul Sister, and the plight of American Indians in a book entitled Bessie Yellowhair, and the problems endured by undocumented workers crossing from Mexico in The Illegals. These books had come to the attention of the "mother" of The New York Times, Mrs. Arthur Hays Sulzberger.

Her father had started the newspaper, then her husband ran it, and in the years that I knew her, her son was the publisher. She invited me to her fashionable apartment on Fifth Avenue for lunches and dinner parties. And, on many occasions, I was a weekend guest at her Greenwich, Conn. home.

She was liberal-minded and praised my efforts to speak for the underdog, even going so far in one letter to say, "You are the most remarkable woman I ever knew." I had little concept that from being buoyed so high I could be dropped so suddenly when I discovered-from her point of view-the "wrong" underdog.

As it happened, I was a weekend guest in her spacious Connecticut home when she read bound galleys of Journey to Jerusalem. As I was leaving, she handed the galleys back with a saddened look: "My dear, have you forgotten the Holocaust?" She felt that what happened in Nazi Germany to Jews several decades earlier should silence any criticism of the Jewish state. She could focus on a holocaust of Jews while negating a modern day holocaust of Palestinians.

I realized, quite painfully, that our friendship was ending. Iphigene Sulzberger had not only invited me to her home to meet her famous friends but, also at her suggestion, The Times had requested articles. I wrote op-ed articles on various subjects including American blacks, American Indians as well as undocumented workers. Since Mrs. Sulzberger and other Jewish officials at the Times highly praised my efforts to help these groups of oppressed peoples, the dichotomy became apparent: most "liberal" U.S. Jews stand on the side of all poor and oppressed peoples save one-the Palestinians.

How handily these liberal Jewish opinion-molders tend to diminish the Palestinians, to make them invisible, or to categorize them all as "terrorists."

Interestingly, Iphigene Sulzberger had talked to me a great deal about her father, Adolph S. Ochs. She told me that he was not one of the early Zionists. He had not favored the creation of a Jewish state.

Yet, increasingly, American Jews have fallen victim to Zionism, a nationalistic movement that passes for many as a religion. While the ethical instructions of all great religions-including the teachings of Moses, Muhammad and Christ-stress that all human beings are equal, militant Zionists take the position that the killing of a non-Jew does not count.

Over five decades now, Zionists have killed Palestinians with impunity. And in the 1996 shelling of a U.N. base in Qana, Lebanon, the Israelis killed more than 100 civilians sheltered there. As an Israeli journalist, Arieh Shavit, explains of the massacre, "We believe with absolute certitude that right now, with the White House in our hands, the Senate in our hands and The New York Times in our hands, the lives of others do not count the same way as our own."

Israelis today, explains the anti-Zionist Jew Israel Shahak, "are not basing their religion on the ethics of justice. They do not accept the Old Testament as it is written. Rather, religious Jews turn to the Talmud. For them, the Talmudic Jewish laws become 'the Bible.' And the Talmud teaches that a Jew can kill a non-Jew with impunity."

In the teachings of Christ, there was a break from such Talmudic teachings. He sought to heal the wounded, to comfort the downtrodden.

The danger, of course, for U.S. Christians is that having made an icon of Israel, we fall into a trap of condoning whatever Israel does-even wanton murder-as orchestrated by God.

Yet, I am not alone in suggesting that the churches in the United States represent the last major organized support for Palestinian rights. This imperative is due in part to our historic links to the Land of Christ and in part to the moral issues involved with having our tax dollars fund Israeli-government-approved violations of human rights.

While Israel and its dedicated U.S. Jewish supporters know they have the president and most of Congress in their hands, they worry about grassroots America-the well-meaning Christians who care for justice. Thus far, most Christians were unaware of what it was they didn't know about Israel. They were indoctrinated by U.S. supporters of Israel in their own country and when they traveled to the Land of Christ most all did so under Israeli sponsorship. That being the case, it was unlikely a Christian ever met a Palestinian or learned what caused the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This is gradually changing, however. And this change disturbs the Israelis. As an example, delegates attending a Christian Sabeel conference in Bethlehem earlier this year said they were harassed by Israeli security at the Tel Aviv airport.

"They asked us," said one delegate, "Why did you use a Palestinian travel agency? Why didn't you use an Israeli agency?" The interrogation was so extensive and hostile that Sabeel leaders called a special session to brief the delegates on how to handle the harassment. Obviously, said one delegate, "The Israelis have a policy to discourage us from visiting the Holy Land except under their sponsorship. They don't want Christians to start learning all they have never known about Israel."

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