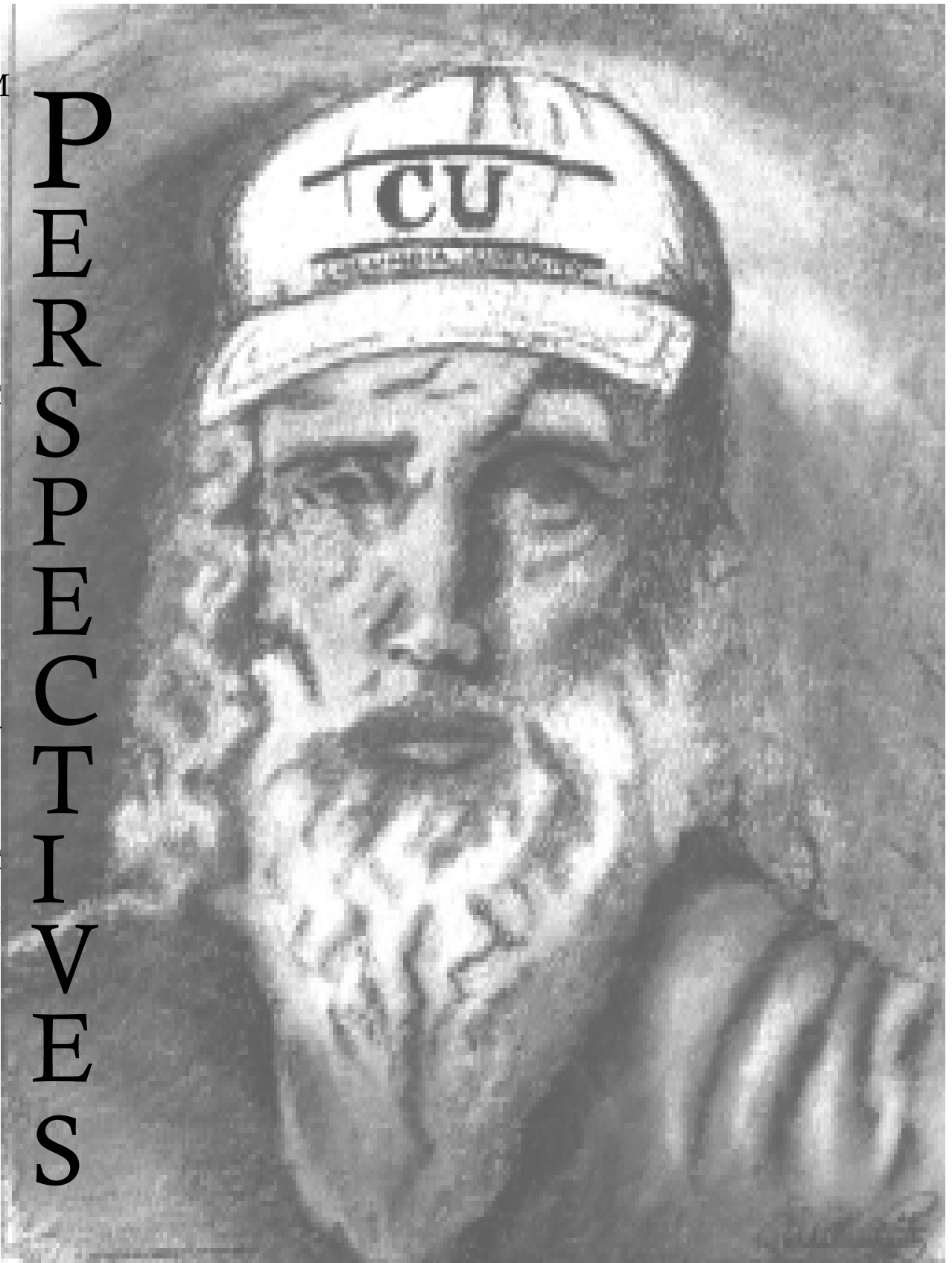


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PERSPECTIVES



PERSPECTIVES

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This issue of PERSPECTIVES is dedicated to the memory of
Joshua Marc Leibowitz, CC '91
1968-1997

Josh was the President of the Jewish student Union at Columbia and served in many leadership roles on campus. He died tragically in Israel in 1997. His family, classmates, and friends have established a memorial fund through the Jewish Campus Life Fund to sustain the community he loved at his alma mater.

May his memory be a blessing for us all.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR:

Before delving into this fascinating issue of Perspectives, I urge all readers to pause for a moment and appreciate the treat that is about to delight and challenge your minds and... perspectives. There are two basic "themes" that structure the articles in this issue, both very important, and both encompassing a wide range of ideas. The first theme is that of Israel as a modern Jewish homeland. Different students express their views and feelings as American Jews, regarding the idea of Israel as a Jewish state today.

The second topic being dealt with is the sticky issue of how students feel about the college experience in Columbia University, in terms of their Jewish identity and affiliation. This issue addresses the concerns of assimilation, acculturation, specific attitudes on campus, and the critical changes that the college years have brought to personal religious beliefs and perceptions.

The themes were presented very broadly, and each writer took the theme that s/he chose to write about in a completely unique direction, depending on his or her particular areas of interest. Therefore, although there are officially two topics being addressed in this issue, actually no two articles deal with the same subject-matter. Each essay is an intelligent, thoughtful piece of work in which the writer struggles with a question that is different from any other. Most of the writers have included personal experiences and emotions in their articles which bring life to the pages in addition to their serving to explain the perception of the writer.

Many thanks and kudos to each thoughtful writer who has shared of yourself by contributing to this issue. Your bravery in addressing these difficult topics so honestly is extremely admirable. I hope that you have gained from the process of writing your work as much as those who read it will benefit.

*Sincerely,
Dassi Tropper
Editor-in-Chief*



A NEW JEW IN AN OLD LAND

By: EZRA FRIEDLAND-WECHSLER (GS, JTS '99)

Seventy nine years ago a dramatic event took place in the northern settlement of Tel Hai in Israel. Tel Hai was one of a number of settlements that had been established by the Zionist *yishuv* (settlement) movement in the upper regions of the Galilee. Its members consisted of a conglomeration of Zionists fleeing the hand of Diaspora persecution, who battled harsh soil and Arab opposition to make their mark in the northern reaches of Palestine. Towards the end of 1919, tensions with their neighbors reached a new level of hostility, and the fateful question arose whether or not to abandon Tel Hai.

The decision to remain steadfast in defense of Tel Hai was to set a definitive precedent, both for the *yishuv* movement, and later for the State of Israel. Two factors influenced the decision. First, these new immigrants had experienced similar persecution in the throes of the Diaspora. Only previously they were helpless and unable to defend themselves, and they had now immigrated specifically to bring about change in that area of their

lives. Second, a retreat from the Tel Hai would symbolize to the Arabs that exertion of force on their part would bring about one retreat after another, and an eventual collapse of the *yishuv* movement in Palestine. Therefore, reinforcements were brought in, led by the dynamic figure of Joseph Trumpeldor. A career soldier, he had lost an arm in the Russian-Japanese War a few years earlier. He organized the volunteers and they strengthened the settlements of the area. They held out until the 11th of Adar 1920, when an Arab mob attacked and left eight of the defenders dead. Among them was Joseph Trumpeldor, who as he lay dying uttered the famous words "Never mind, it is good to die for one's own country." He had always declared that he hated war, and simply fought because he had to. His final solace was that he could at least die fighting for his own nation on his own land. Tel Hai was abandoned after the massacre but resettled before the year was up, and its presence helped to demarcate the future northern border of Israel. Today, the thriving adjacent city of Kiryat Shemona commemorates the bravery of the eight who died on that fateful day. The precedent of defending Jewish land in the face of attack had been set, and the *yishuv* movement never looked back.

For whom did Joseph Trumpeldor and his com-

patriots die? They died for each and every Jew who has lived helplessly in the Diaspora, their destiny forever intertwined with that of their gentile rulers. Out of this abyss arose a Diaspora complex. This complex consisted of a state of submission, an ingrown complacency with the unfortunate situations at hand. When the Jew was forced to flee from one country, he moved to another until the situation repeated itself. The Holocaust was the final player in this drama, as millions of Jews found death because there was nowhere else to go anymore. It was undoubtedly the low point in the long drawn-out Diaspora existence of the Jewish people. And then a miracle. Once again, Jews were sacrificing their lives, but this time there was a reason behind it. Many young Holocaust survivors "illegally" immigrating to Palestine, went right off the boat

and into army service. And when some of them died, they died a very different sort of death, one of dignity, one in defense of their very own State. This was a gallant attempt to insure that what had happened to them,

"Let those fifty years serve as a beacon to every Jew, and to the whole world, that the future of the Jewish people will take form in Israel and nowhere else."

would never again.

It is incumbent upon every Jew to take a walk through the Har Herzl Military Cemetery in Jerusalem. We owe our every step in the Holy Land to each soul that lies in its hallowed earth. For all its sadness, one cannot not help but cry tears of joy there as well. These are Jews who died fighting not only for their ancestors and their own generation, but for my sake and yours, for the sake of every Jew to be born into the world after they had left it. Maybe the most impressionable part of such an experience occurs in the section where those who died in the War of Independence in 1948 are buried. As one passes from stone to stone and observes the places of birth of these soldiers, hardly any two are the same. Jerusalem, Latvia, Australia, the United States, Spain...the list goes on and on. When we pray, we recite the words "Sound the great shofar for our freedom, raise the banner to gather our exiles, and gather us together from the four corners of the earth." This is not an empty statement. This is a living prophecy being fulfilled in the modern State of Israel.

Do not think for a moment that this prophecy lives only in the soil of cemeteries. Take a bus ride and look beneath the ripped jeans, black hats, long shawls, earrings and peyot as Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook

pleaded with us to do. This is the mosaic of the Jewish people. Take a walk Friday afternoon before the Sabbath in the Mahane Yehuda market in downtown Jerusalem. There one will buy fruits alongside an ancient-looking Sephardi woman who arrived on the wings of eagles from Yemen in the early 1950's. She may be holding up the line, but the stories she has to tell! One will purchase hallah in the company of a Hasid whose family has lived in Jerusalem for over 200 years, and eat a falafel with an Ethiopian soldier who was rescued from violent warfare in his native country during Operation Moses. They stand there united simply because there is a State of Israel to unite them. They stand there together because they have an army that does not want to fight, but does so in complete bravery because it must. As Yoni Netanyahu is reputed to have said as he led an operation to free the hostages held in Entebbe Airport, Uganda in 1976 "We are risking our lives to save them simply because they are Jews, and if we don't do it, no one else will."

For thousands of years, Jews had turned toward Eretz Yisrael and mourned their estrangement from her holy places. Then, in 1967, Rav Shlomo Goren, former Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces, walked into a Maarat HaMachpela in Hevron that had not seen a Jew inside its walls in 700 years! The days of being forced to stand outside on the seventh step of a place where our very own forefathers and mothers were buried were no more. At the same time, General Motta Gur was exclaiming over the radio "Har Habayit Byadeinu! The Temple Mount is in our hands!" Now Jerusalem, the city of which control had changed hands more than any other in history, was unified under Jewish sovereignty. It is taught that there is a Jerusalem above in the heavens whose status mirrors that of the one below. How great the celebration of those souls occupying the Jerusalem on High who had died over thousands of years, in the defense and recapture of the Jerusalem below. This was a new Jew, experiencing things unimaginable in the shtetls of Poland and Russia, in the marketplaces of Damascus and Baghdad. The Jews had returned to the Kotel, to the Old City, to Judea and Samaria, to the very heart of our biblical existence.

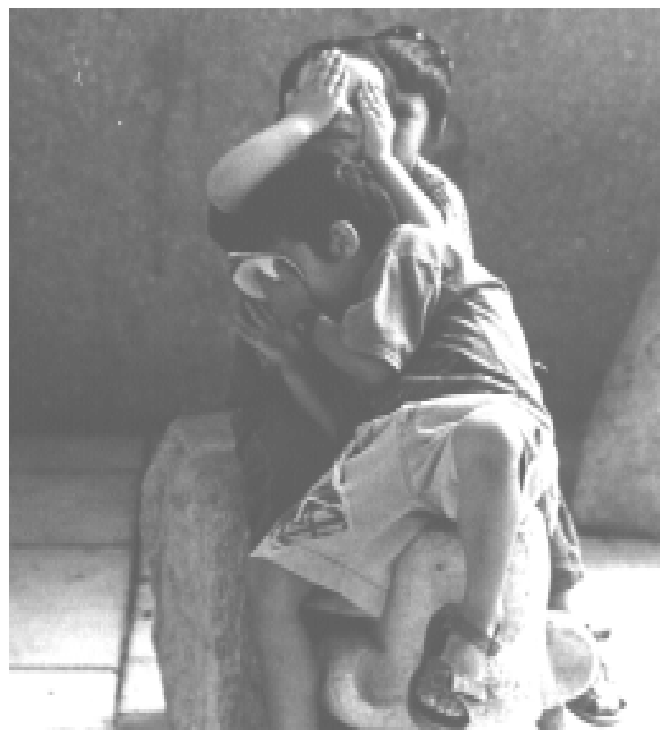
After 2000 years, it is our very generation that has been chosen to renew the legacy of Jewish sovereignty in their own land. There is a Law of Return, and every Jew from the four corners of the earth has the right to finally come home. How many of our ancestors would have given everything they owned to be presented with the opportunity that we now face? Yet

we still suffer from the same Diaspora complex that Joseph Trumpeldor, and every Joseph Trumpeldor that has followed him, has battled against. We face it both in the Diaspora, and however ironically in Israel as well.

Many in our Holy Land have forgotten the miracles that have filled the daily life of over 100 years in this new era of Jewish history. These miracles are encountered every day, but if one fails to open one's eyes and bask in their glory, then they are so easily missed. The necessity of standing strong in the face of ones enemies, and the right of a Jew to settle and defend his Holy Land, has been compromised by those who search for international approval. It is from these same countries that we were forced to flee, and we put our very existence on the line when we ironically seek their approval of our actions. No one can understand the suffering and glory that come hand in hand as a Jew except for ourselves. It is therefore to each other that we must turn, and not to others on the outside. Symbolically, we live in a time when certain parts of the population are labeled settlers. How unfortunate that sight has been lost of the fact that every citizen of the State of Israel is a settler, struggling courageously to survive, no matter where on its map they may find themselves.

There is one group of Jews though who are not settlers in any sense of the word. They are the Diaspora Jews who by choice continue to perpetuate their exist-

continued *New Jew* page 34



A TORN ZIONSIM

By: YEHUDAH KURTZER (CC '00)

It is perhaps the most frustrating and omnipresent issue I have dealt with and that I foresee dealing with in the future. For me, it drives home not only fundamental questions about community and identity, place and profession, but also larger existential questions about being and purpose. The existence of God? Hardly. That would be an interesting query, to be sure; one that could open up many curious avenues for exploration, and I haven't altogether abandoned the thought of dedicating my life to finding an answer to that question.

But as a personal journey it pales in comparison to the burning question of whether I both want to, and plan to, live in Israel. Ah, Israel, the romantic, ancient, magical strip of land which occupies a fraction of the world's land and population and yet owns a monopoly of the world's attention; the coastal quasi-Mediterranean, quasi-Fertile Crescent democracy which keeps a death grip on the ideological pulse of the Jewish people.

As a fan of the Bible, which I consider one of the best, if not the best, books ever written (or revealed), the question should seem kind of open-and-shut. My discovery that the Bible was only intended for a population living in Israel was almost revelatory, and certainly changed my life. Not that I would be so brazen as to claim that my discovery was original; truthfully, most Jewish sources have been subtly arguing the case for *aliya* since that first fateful departure 2500 years ago. It was just that subtlety that was ultimately so overwhelmingly blinding. Read the Bible, and count the amount of times that God prefaces the discussion of a new law with the condition "when you enter the land." The book of Deuteronomy alone could serve as a manual for any Zionist Congress. As a religious text, the overarching message is one that as the book ends, the sequel is intended to be the annals of a people living in their land, a job achieved quite poorly by the prophetic literature. If understood anthropologically as a myth text, written by a people to provide a basis for their history and location, the argument is even more compelling. Whether or not all that Exodus stuff actually took place is irrelevant; the whole story may have been invented in order to provide a sufficiently compelling and miraculous reason for the inhabiting of the Land of Israel, which of course it does.

Consider the Oral Tradition, again a source of religious debate but certainly a valid source in tracking the evolving ideology of the Jewish people. By now, Jews have been living in the Diaspora for over five hundred years. Ezra, the first Zionist, succeeded in bringing back a fervor to Jerusalem

after the first exile; and also in creating a division between the Israel Jews and those left behind in Babylon. Followed by Nehemia, who drained the swamps, Ezra resuscitated Jewish life largely through innovation and compromise, and more importantly re-established a pattern of dignity that would ultimately lead to the reclamation by Jews of political power in their little piece of the earth. Forget about states, sovereignty, and independence; the Jews at this point were very much still



a tribe fighting for survival in the ancient Mid-East, building their legacy alongside Babylonians and Persians and other now-dead civilizations. The land to them may not have been consecrated in any way; but they claimed it was theirs. Whether this was divinely ordained or not, whether the mythology was just that, this was a failed kingdom that for some reason still clutched at a passionate hope that they could revive their civilization among the peaks of Judea and along the coast of Dan. Their brethren outside the land retained their connection to the Old Country until they became hopelessly "lost": like so many in the ancient world, subsumed into whatever new rising civilization seemed more compelling.

So we arrive at the Yavneh academy, at Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Akiva, the controversial heroes of Judaism during the first centuries of the now-common era. Dealing with a fractured community, a people largely exiled again and likely disenchanted with the deo-centered legends of their fathers, a residual faithful that was resisting the temptations of joining the attractive new faith with its promises of universalism and salvation, the Rabbis pragmatically redesigned almost everything they had been taught. Stamping their legacy with the finger of God, the heirs to Jewish leadership in Israel, and subsequently the larger body of faithful still sticking to Israel-

centered traditions in Babylon quietly but aggressively began to debate, modify, and ultimately endorse a religion which provided for the possibility of life outside the beloved homeland. The theology was almost easy; the stronger and more distantly powerful than humans that God becomes, the easier it becomes for God to wreak punishment upon His people. Toss in collective guilt, a legend of prophetic wisdom, and a measure of literature heavily focused on inherited traditions and truths, and it becomes very easy to detach from the land-centered religion and embark on a more God-centered religion. After all, is not God accessible everywhere? Cannot God's laws, now increasing and becoming more complicated every day, be observed by all faithful, especially when we understand within them a universal moral importance? Granted, there is much that we can no longer do, now that we have been detached from that land. But that should simply serve to inspire within us a greater longing for the land, for the opportunities denied us by being so far from God's original home. We are incomplete Jews when away from the land, and here is where the remarkable evolution hits its peak, not because the entire premise of the religion was to be a people within the land observing the dictates of God, but because we cannot complete the duties this God has instructed us. We can achieve greatness in God's eyes, we can memorize and even increase the body of God's wisdom, we can incorporate the greatest of the world's philosophy into our system, we can start calling ourselves monotheists, and we can begin developing a far more peripheral relationship to the land.

And so an ideology, a religion, a history take shape. And with these trends come so many others. Distance from anything so beloved increases the passion; and so the literature becomes more longing, the plight so much more desperate, and the land itself earns a new, unforeseen and unforeseeable holiness. What had always been simply a place to live, a perhaps arbitrary piece of turf with some lovable nooks and crannies is now suddenly embedded with intrinsic holiness. Where previously the presence of God had granted Israel its centrality, now the presence of man achieves that purpose. Kabbalists are drawn to the northern hills by allegedly holier airs and waters; sites are consecrated in Jerusalem by pilgrims over many generations; medieval rabbis compose love poetry to the land; small streams of devotees, over many centuries, sacrifice life and limb to return to the now underpopulated, overgrown country. That is the heart of Zionism, an ideology borne out of the fateful intersection of religion and nationalism from as early as the first century, a lucky product of the surviving remnant of Judaism from its early struggle for

its own identity. Zionism, in all its forms, was an organic development from the conditions which preceded it. Not necessarily an anticipated development based on the Bible; but certainly a product of the first century and on.

I am born into a generation during which Zionism finally saw at least partial achievement of its objectives. I was not born during the Holocaust, the horrific climax of Jewish subordination among the nations, and unquestionably one of the *raison d'être* for Israel as an existant state in the league of nations. I was not born during the tearful return and romanticized (and fictionalized) resettlement of the land by the first pioneers; nor during the early years of independence, warfare, hora dancing, and identity building; nor during the impassioned speeches of Abba Eban, the strikes by Israeli warplanes on embarrassed enemies, and the establishment of the greatest sense of Jewish pride since perhaps the splitting of

"All 'light unto the nations' imagery will need to be reserved for the fireworks of volatile rhetoric and the bright flashes of internal warfare."

the Red Sea. Maybe being born earlier would have made my life easier. No; my life as it correlates to events in Israel sees Israel finally being perceived as an aggressor, Jews for the first time in a long time portrayed as persecutors, confusion over Jewish identity, intra-Jewish battles over boundaries, and a rapid decline in immigration. With several notable exceptions in my lifetime which elicit pride, namely Entebbe, the Operations Moses and Solomon, and the Madrid peace conference, my generation is that of Sabra and Shatilla, the intifada, the conversion crisis, and the Rabin assassination. How ironic that the word "Rabin" should mean three different things for three different generations! For us, he is not a war hero but a 73 year old politician, the victim of a horrifying divide within the Jewish people who supposedly longed so desperately for the land, so desperate to get a second chance to perfect a civilization in the eyes of God, perhaps even meriting a return of the divine presence.

This is the Israel we are given, one where technology exceeds the importance of agriculture, where now there are more second- and third-generation Israelis than immigrants, and where few feel anything else walking down the streets than part of a gigantic powder keg that may have already exploded. And so for us, 2500 years of history, ideology, Hebrew school education, pride, embarrassment, and personal ambition weigh on our shoulders as we walk by STA Travel and glance at the Tel Aviv - \$749 sign.

Why all the history? It is a decent question; for the Jewish people in the modern age, we need not seek the Bible

ISRAEL: THE ULTIMATE LINK

By: ROBERT SHERER (SEAS '99)

I had never had a desire to visit Israel when I was growing up. The extent of my interaction with Jewish people came from attending Hebrew School three times a week as a supplement to my public school education. I liked going for the most part, because I knew my religion was important, and because seeing other Jewish kids was nice, since there were not so many in my school. But I never felt an overwhelming Jewish identity. Judaism was a part of me, but not the central focus of my life. My parents instilled in me the importance of being Jewish, that I was different from my non-Jewish friends. But I never understood why.

When I arrived at Columbia, my world turned upside down. Previously, it had been a bit of an indulgence to spend significant time with my extended Jewish family, or with friends from the greater Jewish com-

munity. These encounters occurred only at Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, High holidays, and maybe a Passover Seder every other year or so. Once in a while we'd go to dinner and a movie with family friends, but most of my interactions were with my non-Jewish friends, from my school.

Columbia, on the other hand, had Jews everywhere. I was running into Jews in classes, at parties, on my floor, on the steps, everywhere. There seemed to be an endless supply. I'd never experienced anything like it. I'd been to summer camp, but I knew I'd be home in three weeks and that I wouldn't be seeing these kids for a long time. But now I was in college, I'd be here for four years, and all of the Jews, even with a turnover rate, would be around the whole time. It was very strange. I'd even say it was mind-boggling. What had always been an infrequent rendezvous, spending any time with Jewish people, became a daily occurrence, and I loved it.

From spending time with all of these people, I discovered observant Jews, non-observant Jews, Jews in the middle, and the abyss between all of them. Some people felt one way about certain things, and other people looked in the opposite direction. It was fascinating not only to meet all of the Jewish people and to learn of their backgrounds, beliefs, and desires, but to see them interact with each other. From this, after being indifferent towards Israel for so long, an urge to visit Israel grew within me.

Israel had always been a place we learned about in Hebrew school. Moses wanted to get there,

King David was there, and I never cared if I'd go or not. People talked about, visited, and loved Israel, but it meant little to me. It was an unknown place, far, far away. I'd seen pictures, but it was unimaginable. Suddenly, being

around all of these Jews who spoke of Israel with such affection, my curiosity stirred me enough to actually make the trip. Over winter break, I went to Israel.

It was a program designed for college students who had never visited Israel. We would see all of the sights: the Kotel, Massadah, the Dead Sea, the desert, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, the Golan. The trip ended up being a whirlwind tour that had me more exhausted than anything else. We slept very little, traveled often, and walked even more. We saw everything, or at least we felt like we saw everything. Rather than getting just quick and meaningless glances at places we visited, though, everything we saw was significant.

My first time at the Kotel was crazy, because it was right before Shabbat, and there were literally thousands of people there. The experience was unique. All of the people — some praying, some dancing — were in awe. The plaza smelled and sounded almost as if it were alive. I was speechless. The Kotel is quite



possibly the most important religious, historical, and cultural site for the Jewish people. It represents what every Jew should hold important: the bridge between past times and current times. The Kotel is the ultimate example of why I feel Israel is so important, and so great.

Every place we went to was fantastic. We went on an archeological dig. We went swimming, hiking, walking, bussing, praying, everything you could imagine. Every place was so wonderful and new, exciting and powerful. More so not because it was all new, but because of what it represented. When we were in the desert, one of the adult leaders on our trip reminded the group of how we were near to the place where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. That we were close to where our people became a nation. It was amazing. Comforting. Every place I went, I thought of the people there before me, at Massadah, for example, home of the tragic destruction of a Jewish society. On the way from the Tel Aviv airport to Jerusalem, seeing all of the destroyed military cars, I thought of the people that died to make Israel the modern state that it is today. These people walked the same land I now stepped over, and I am linked to them. This is what I loved best.

Israel's magnitude is that it is where my people come from. I grew up in Seattle. My grandfather was born in 1914 in Seattle and was raised there. I have close ties to that city because of my grandfather and of my family now, and I also have close ties to New York, where my father grew up. But Israel is different. Israel is different because even though I had never laid eyes on its land before, or met its people before, I knew I was home when I arrived there. Even if I never made plans to move or live in Israel, I was at the place where my family originated.

Everywhere we went, I thought the same thing: I am from this place. Jerusalem is powerful because it is the religious center. At the Kotel, one can visit where the priests used to perform the sacrifices to God. Whether one is an extremely observant Jew, or does nothing more than identify as Jewish, the Kotel is a link to the past

because it is where our ancestors visited for the family offering to God. It links us to our past, and eventually to our future. This is the beauty of Israel, and this is why I finally realized why I was different. I could trace where I am from without any arguments. I stood at the Kotel smiling, because I knew my father had been there, and his father before him, and all of my relatives since ancient times. The lineage exists and thrives, and will forever live on without failure. My children will visit Israel, and so will their children.

This bridge is why my trip to Israel was so wonderful for me. I finally understood what everyone talked about, why they loved Israel so. Not because of Kosher McDonalds or the sun. Not because of the tourism, or the clubs, or the yeshivas. But because of what Israel means. It is the place where any Jew, observant, non observant, and everywhere in between is from and can feel comfortable. Just like at Columbia, in Israel there were Jews who believed in all sorts of different things that were living and working and being together. It was captivating to see these dynamics in Israel, but calming to know why all of those people were there: because of their link to their ancestry. With all of the differences, these people who argue, fight, and don't get along are still in the same place and for the same reason: to be home, to be where they know they are welcome, and to be in the place that is theirs. This is why Jews are different, we have a home that differentiates us, that links our past to our future, and ultimately, will keep us united forever.

"[THE KOTEL] REPRESENTS WHAT EVERY JEW SHOULD HOLD IMPORTANT: THE BRIDGE BETWEEN PAST TIMES AND CURRENT TIMES."

