



4 SHABBAT SHALOM



Daniel Gal

Mr. Daniel Gal is an Israeli diplomat who has served Israel as an ambassador in many countries such as Canada, Italy, Costa Rica, and several African nations. He speaks five languages (Hebrew, English, French, Italian and Spanish). Mr. Gal was born in Oran, Algeria.

Sabbat Shalom: *What does this 60th anniversary mean for you as an Israeli and as a Jew?*

Daniel Gal: The number 6 has particular significance for the people of Israel. In the Bible we have the six days of creation. In the book of Exodus we learn that the number of Israelites who left Egypt in the time of Moses was 600,000, and it is interesting to note that the number of Jews who were living in Israel in 1948 when the State of Israel became independent was 600,000. Certainly the Lord wanted to give us a sign of his approval for the creation of the State of Israel. On the sad side, the number six reminds us also of the holocaust and its six million Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis.

On the other hand we remember the spiritual meaning of the State of Israel for us. Israel is the Promised Land, the land which has been given by God to the people of Israel, and the heart of Israel is Jerusalem that has been chosen by God for his house, the Temple. Since that time Jerusalem has been the eternal capital of the Jewish people. We would be happy if the world would accept with us that this country has been given to the people of Israel. That does not mean to

deny the right of the Palestinian people but to recognize that both peoples have the right to live in this small country.

Another point about this celebration is that it is a formal denial of every false prediction which said that the State of Israel would not be a viable State—that it is too small with too much conflict. It is true that we did not succeed in establishing peace with every country around us, but we have already signed peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. However, we cannot be satisfied with that. We will not consider our efforts for peace complete until we have signed a peace treaty with every country around us.

Sabbat Shalom: *Any anniversary is a special occasion not only for celebration, but also for self-criticism. Would you please share with our readers your reflections on these two issues: the main reason why we should celebrate with Israel and the main reason why we should criticize—the reasons for joy and the reasons for regret.*

Gal: All Israelis do some self-criticism at the time of this celebration, yet they also compliment themselves for what has been accomplished in scientific, technological, and other domains during the last sixty years.

The criticism we can express is that we have been so occupied by the creation and the building of this State that we have neglected segments of our society. I am thinking right now about the social and educational areas. What is curious is that the Jewish people have always



been attentive to the social situation and to the level of education of its pupils. Education of every generation has always been a priority for the Jewish people. But it has not been easy to implement this value and principle in the State of Israel. We have constantly received new immigrants in Israel, many of them not very educated, from Yemen, Ethiopia, many Arab countries, and lately from countries of the former Soviet Union. It has been very expensive to help them assimilate into society. Also, the founding of the universities has not been easy. Equipment becomes more and more expensive. Even though the State of Israel would like to include everyone in higher education, it is not easy.

Some people think that there is not enough unity among the people of Israel; there are so many political parties and religious factions that it is not easy to understand our society. I would just like to say to these people who complain about our lack of unity that we don't have to confuse "unity" and "uniformity." The unity of the Jewish people was founded on the land of Israel, but our division of ideas is also our richness. What is important is to find ourselves unified around some fundamental values which have always been the values of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom: *Do you think that someday this reason for criticism and regret will disappear, and this regret will be solved in such a way that the criticism will turn into celebration?*

Gal: Yes. Let me share with you some positive points for which we must celebrate. One of them is that Israel succeeded in gathering into Israel more than half of the world's Jewish population. That is a great victory. Even those who never even dreamed of one day coming to Israel—the "Silent Jews," those who were living behind the Iron Curtain—are today free to come to Israel and more than one million of them are living in Israel.

Shabbat Shalom: *In your view, what is the most important achievement of Israel since the great achievement of the establishment of the State of Israel?*

Gal: There is growing communication among Jews all over the world. The new technologies are available everywhere for everyone. The number of universities in proportion to the population is one of the highest in the world. The number of doctoral students is growing every year which makes this country one of the most educated in the world. Even though that seems to be in opposition to what I have said before, it is a reality in Israel.

Shabbat Shalom: *Besides the dream of peace, what hope do you still entertain?*

Gal: Hope is one of the fundamental values of Israel. Our national hymn is *Hatikva* which means "The Hope." Without hope we could not build a country like the State of Israel.

We remember the spiritual meaning of the State of Israel for us.

Prime Minister Ben Gurion, one of the founders of the State of Israel, said: "One who is living in Israel and does not believe in miracles is not a realistic person." It is one of the many paradoxes of Israel. Even those who are not religious believe in miracles. If we had not had this hope and the audacious idea of creating the State of Israel we would never be where we are today and we would not have accomplished what has been accomplished.

Many were sure that the State of Israel would not succeed. How can you survive when you are about 600,000 facing hundreds of millions of Arabs around you who are so hostile? The miracle happened and sixty years after the creation of the State, Israel is still here and stronger than ever.

Our biggest hope today is peace. Peace is on the agenda of every political party in Israel. Each is different with their own conditions, but every



one of them wants to build peace with Arab countries and the Palestinians. That has always been the case, even when all the Arabs around us were against Israel. Thus today we see the positive aspects of our peace with Egypt and Jordan. That encourages us to persevere in the direction of building peace with all our neighboring countries.

We have built a very successful Israeli society, and I rejoice that this country occupies a central place in the heart of the Jewish people and in the world of Judaism. We hope that Israel will become even more important for the Jewish people. We have a very special program called "Birthright." It is financed by some wealthy people and gives us the opportunity to bring young people to Israel for a visit of ten days. These young people are connected with the reality of the country and when they return home they become ambassadors of Israel all around the world.

Another dream or hope we have is that more and more of Israel will become a light for the surrounding nations and also those in Africa and in Asia. Israel already has a program which helps many countries in their development. Israel teaches agriculture in poor regions, and drip irrigation in desert countries.

Our hope is to make our knowledge in new technology, agriculture, irrigation, solar energy, science, and medical research, and our discoveries available for all Arab countries in the Middle East. Right now these countries are not ready for such cooperation, but we really hope there will be a day when this collaboration and sharing will be possible. Israel would like to see a prospering and rich Middle East where the desert will be changed and fertilized and where the development of our people will be a priority for everyone.

We already have some collaboration with engineers of Arab countries who come to study agriculture and desert irrigation in our universities. But Arab countries are not doing a lot to advertise these programs because it is not popular among their populations, and they try to manage their sensitivity.

Right now the Palestinians are benefiting from many of Israel's scientific and medical discoveries. A few years ago I was the victim of a car accident. When I was in the emergency department of the hospital, I was surprised to see many Palestinian patients. Israel helps them and provides treatment for premature babies, difficult surgeries, and heart disease. The hospital in Holon that specializes in cardiology receives and successfully treats patients from all over the world, but these stories are not very popular so they are not reported.

I arrived in Israel when I was 18. For me the first years in the State of Israel were the most beautiful, but I don't like nostalgia.

Shabbat Shalom: *Is there a place in your dream for the religious vocation of Israel? Do you see the faith of Israel as a part of your dream? If yes, how?*

Gal: The religious vocation of Israel is to be a light among the nations. But I would add that our vocation is and must be lived in the state of "waiting." Israel is a people who "waits"—waits for a better life and waits for the "world-to-come." The land of Israel is for me a spiritual patrimony which unites the Jewish people. We would like every Jew to consider this land important personally and to feel this unity with the land of Israel.

I remember a few years ago, when I was in Italy as an ambassador of Israel, a good friend of mine, a wealthy man, took me to visit some of his properties. He said to me, "You know, if my son would like to see all my patrimony and my property, it would take many days to do it." I said that I too would like my children to be



interested in my properties. He was astonished and asked, "Have you many properties?" I answered, "Yes, but our properties are our cultural, historic, and spiritual patrimony."

The vocation of Israel is achieved through its humanism, by its great number of Jews who receive awards all over the world, especially the Nobel Prize. I don't believe in the gene of intelligence but Israel has always favored education and study—the complete development of physical, intellectual, mental, and spiritual capacities. Today we see the result of these priorities. That is one of the reasons why we think that Israel should preserve its Jewish character. Without the Jewishness of this State we would not have any justification to be there.

Shabbat Shalom: *When you remember your youth and the first years of Israel, do you have some nostalgia?*

Gal: I arrived in Israel when I was 18. For me the first years in the State of Israel were the most beautiful, but I don't like nostalgia. At that time we had nothing and thought that we had everything. Today we have everything and we think we have nothing. I like to look at the future and be sure that our dreams will be fulfilled and our hope for a better world will be a reality.

Shabbat Shalom: *Do you think that Israel was better, greater, then?*

Gal: Maybe at the level of its values. But I don't want to fall into nostalgia. The Jewish people and Israel could not do and be what they can do and be because of the conflict with the Palestinians and the enormous amount of energy we have used to build our country.

Shabbat Shalom: *What is missing in the Israel of today that was there at the beginning?*

Gal: What I miss the most and what was great at that time was the pioneer spirit. The spirit running in the country among the young people is not the same as at the beginning. That's why,

for example, we don't find many young people ready to enter a political career. They are disappointed, saying that the political world is too corrupt. They are right. There is some corruption, but we cannot generalize. I know personally that we have very good and committed people in the political world.

Shabbat Shalom: *Do you think that we should recover this value, and how should we do it?*

Gal: Of course we can always improve things. I think that if we can emphasize our future in education, philosophy of life, and ethics, then we will find our vocation and we will be this light for the nations. Israel is a great country of technology but that is not enough. We must work on much more than that.

Shabbat Shalom: *My last question will play on the name of our journal, Shabbat Shalom. As you know, this is an old greeting which contains the old ideal of Israel, the longing for the rest, the Shabbat, and the hope for peace, the Shalom when we will rest from war and troubles. Could you please share with us what thoughts this old Hebrew greeting inspires in you?*

Gal: For me the title of your journal reminds me of the creation. God created the world in six days, and He rested on the seventh day. Since creation this greeting of *Shabbat Shalom* is in the mind of the people who have kept Shabbat.

The Shabbat fits very well with the concept of shalom because it is the day when you come back to the spiritual and the family. The two poles of the Shabbat relationship are with God and with your family, your Creator and your neighbors. It is an elevation, and this elevation cannot be experienced with material things only but also with the spiritual. That's why for me the spiritual aspect is the most important.

This interview was conducted by Amram Elofer.