

Rehovot, Israel.

The Ulpan in Oshiot was having a graduation party. Having completed their basic Hebrew training, several dozen Jewish immigrants from Rumania, the Soviet Union, India, Turkey, Argentina, South Africa, Canada and the United States were gathered to celebrate.

They laughed and ate and talked. Each sang a song from his or her native land. The classmate from the U.S., from San Francisco, sang "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy." After the round, they again laughed and ate and talked.

It hadn't been that way at their first meeting, some months ago. They had gathered quietly, nervously, huddled by country, a Babel, most unable to communicate with each other. Then someone struck up Havah Nagilah. They all knew it and sang out together. In an instant, they were unified.

That, in a nutshell, was a meaning of Israel. They had come to Israel for different reasons. The oleh from the Soviet Union had escaped danger. The Rumanians and Argentinians had found economic conditions increasingly hard and decided they might as well start anew in a free country, with other Jews. Others just wanted to be with other Jews, and in Israel. Whatever the reasons, there was a place for them to come easily, where they would find instant community as Jews, and security.

Well, more community than security, perhaps. A taxicab driver who had emigrated from Yugoslavia in 1948 said: "Israel is a hard country." Was he talking about economic hardship? He shook his head. "No quiet," he said. "War after war, and enemies all around us."

His family had come to Israel because of Hitler. "We should be in our own land," his father had said, "so that tragedy won't happen again, so we won't be a hated minority surrounded by enemies."

"It's better that we are together and we can fight together," said the ex-Yugoslavian, "but here we are again, a hated minority, surrounded by enemies."

The Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces, Moshe Levy, said as Pesach wound down, the army is leaving Lebanon as fast as it can -- but that won't mean peace. "Israel is always at war," said Levy, and will be "as long as Arab states or terrorist groups continue to proclaim that their goal is war against Israel."

There won't be peace with the Arabs in our lifetime, said one young oleh from San Francisco who came about eight years ago. "We both want the same land" -- by which he meant not just Judea and Samaria, but Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. He felt that the only security, therefore, was for Israel to complete its de facto takeover of the west bank of the Jordan River.

Others believe that would be a thin security at best, and think that it would be best to barter some land in Judea and Samaria for possibilities of peace. But, pointing to the growing military might of Syria, the new ties between the Iranian Ayatollah and the radicalized Shiites of Lebanon, the ambiguity of Egypt and the tenuous position of King Hussein -- they do not see any clear design for peace.

"No quiet," the cab driver had said, shaking his head, "no quiet."

It seems quiet enough, walking the streets in the towns of Israel. At least, there is no sign of care from the multitudes of playing children, Israel's bounty crop; or from the shoppers or the street-talkers or the sidewalk coffee drinkers. They don't even look up as the warplanes roar through the skies.

At Hamat Gader, there is a continuing playland for children who come in busloads from around Israel. There is one of those arenas in which electric cars smash harmlessly against each other. There are small "airplanes" which twirl around, following each other endlessly, while pop music blares. There is an extensive alligator farm. There are some notable Roman bath ruins, but there is also a large modern pool connected to the hot springs, complete with mud baths in which the children love to squirm.

It is a happy, carefree place, but it is only meters away from the Jordanian border, and constantly visible above all the revelry are pillboxes, Israeli soldiers watching the border, guns pointed.

At a kibbutz in Northern Galilee, the children play strenuously and joyfully in their quarters, which are surrounded by fences topped with gnarled barbed wire. In the guest house, notices in the rooms say, "In case of alarm, lock your door and stay inside."

In Rehovot, a neighbor, member of a bomb squad, knocks on the door with a package that had been left in the hall. Don't leave packages around, he warns.

Indeed, there is no great danger for civilians at the moment -- and the precautions are, in a way, comforting. But they are also reminders that the people of Israel are constantly in harm's way. Simply, Israel is surrounded by a hundred million hostiles, many of them ready to fire or march at the first sign of vulnerability.

A number of Israelis have been and more will be looking at a film made in San Francisco called "American Jews in Politics." It was made by the Endowment Fund of the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation as part of a joint project in mutual understanding between Tel Aviv and San Francisco. It was shown in recent weeks to groups in Tel Aviv, with a representative of the San Francisco Federation present. At one such meeting with Israeli journalists, politicians, educators and academics, this question was asked:

"Your San Francisco film shows how American Jews have become so involved in politics, so often on behalf of Israel. It's a little surprising to some of us. Why are American Jews so involved on behalf of Israel?"

That is a question which, in one form or another, was raised again and again. It reveals some perplexity on the part of many Israelis as to the nature of American Jewry and its connection to Israel.

But on one level, the answer to that question is simple. As long as there are Jews from the Soviet Union, or Rumania, or Argentina -- or elsewhere -- as represented in the Ulpan in Oshiot, who feel danger or alienation as Jews in the lands of their birth, the vast majority of American Jews will feel a sense of responsibility towards them. And as long as the Jews of Israel are in harm's way, nine out of ten American Jews will do what they can to guarantee American support, an indispensable part of Israel's protection.

But is that enough, Israelis wanted to know? If American Jewish identity is dwindling, will not American Jewish political activity on behalf of Israel dwindle as well? the question demonstrated the need for more discussion between American Jews and Israelis such as the kind stimulated by this San Francisco film.

American Jewish political activity may not be enough --neither is the singing of Havah Nagilah -- but in itself it is a signal of Jewish identity -- and it will not diminish as long as American Jews do not get lulled into forgetting that Israelis still live in deep and imminent harm's way.