

President's Perspective. . . Glad to be Back Home!

In his Shabbat message just prior to the Independence Day weekend, Rabbi Kushnick wrote a compelling piece about our life as Jews in the United States. Toward the end of the message he asked us to think for a moment about what life would be like if we did not live in this country. As it happened, Ann and I, along with fellow congregants Fern and Andy Farkas, Amy and Phil Leibowitz and Beth Torah members Larry and Shirley Strauss, were in the United Kingdom, Ireland and France when I read Rabbi Kushnick's message -- and the "what if" rang loud and clear to me.

While our democratic ideals sprang from the constitutional monarchy of England, I could not escape the idea that in that country, not to mention dozens of others throughout the world, religion and the state are tied together. And while Ireland and France are officially secular countries, Catholicism forms the bedrock of their history and institutions. Freedom of religion in France is more or less a recent historical phenomenon – a freedom the French are trying very hard to cope with. A particular religion plays an official or semi-official role in those societies. Our forefathers thankfully eschewed such roles when our country was formed.

So, what if we, as Jews, lived in these exemplary democracies? As we sampled some of the Jewish communities during our trip, there seemed to be a fear imbedded in those communities that we simply cannot recognize here. Sure, we have had to ramp up security at our shul in the past year and incidents of anti-Semitism in the U.S. have increased; but it is nothing compared to living in a country where official religions are common and the Jewish community must be protected by the state that has such ties to those institutions.

In Ireland, we were told not to distribute any information about our visit to a synagogue over the internet. Bars and gates made entry and exit difficult at that shul. Many of you know the story of French Jews since the incidents of a year ago. Just about all Jewish institutions are protected by French police or military with very wicked looking weapons. We were told that this protection would last until the "next election" and then we will have to wait and see that happens then. The sad fact is that the Jewish communities of Europe have to seek protection by the church/state, an idea that is difficult for us to imagine. To the credit of many of these countries, there is protection – something that was lacking about 75 years ago.

So, let's be glad we are here where we are not looked at as a protectorate of the state. Sure, we have our tussles with church/state issues, but that pales in comparison to what many of our fellow Jews see in their European communities. It is good to be home.

Have a good rest of the summer. Remember to get your registration in for this new fiscal year and we will see you at Shabbat under the Stars.

Howard Rubin