

The Balcony

This year, in celebration of 350 years of Jewish life in America, *Sh'ma* is featuring a monthly column by Israeli Ruth Calderon. Launched in October, Calderon shares her perceptions of Jewish life in America — from A to Z, America to Zionism. The full reflection will be posted on www.shma.com.


EXPRESSIONS — Conversations are structured around stock phrases. Thus you will hear “I can’t wait” in connection with almost every meeting, and every meeting ends with “It was great.” At a business meeting, someone will almost certainly say “to be on the same page” and any creative idea will be described idiomatically as “out of the box.” To a foreign ear, all of these expressions sound as if all the partners in the conversation have accepted rules for translating their thoughts into a few dozen common phrases and have agreed not to say anything unique.

FLAG — It is impossible not to notice that this country is covered with flags. I can’t get used to how Americans degrade it: a flag tablecloth, a pair of clogs — the left in stripes, the right in stars — and flag bathing suits. If someone in Israel wore a blue and white bathing suit with a Star of David, he would probably end up in the hospital, if not in court.

I ask myself: what are Americans trying to prove? Who are they trying to convince? Is there such a great lack of confidence in America’s nationalism that so many flags must be displayed? Nationalism has been suspect ever since the Second World War. National identity remains, but with a tinge of ambivalence. To an intellectual Israeli, flying a flag seems like a vulgar, unrefined, and dangerous activity. It raises suspicions of sacrificing the individual’s identity to the masses of the nation.

Last year, at a lecture in a synagogue sanctuary, the speaker stood between the Israeli flag, on a mast topped with a Star of David, and the American flag, on a mast topped with an eagle. To an Israeli, an eagle is a symbol that the Roman Empire wanted placed in the Temple to demonstrate their rule over the Jews. In Israeli public school, I learned about our refusal to submit to the eagle; Jewish independence and national honor depended on it.

I found it difficult to concentrate on the lecture. Viewing the two flags, I began to understand that American Jews do not believe that their acceptance of the imperial identity makes them less Jewish and, to my surprise, after the initial shock, I agreed. Now I see

the beauty in American patriotism — how it coexists with independent cultural identities in positive and non-threatening ways. The stars and stripes serve mainly as the rules of the game and the government refers to itself without embarrassment as an administration. Public servants are perceived not as prophets or thinkers but as people of action. There could be something to this. 



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