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Painting by Avi Katz.(Photo by: AVI KATZ)

The 5776 mirror: Looking back over the past Jewish year

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As we look back over the past Jewish year, Israel has room for much optimism and hope – and a dark cloud or two.

ED KOCH, the legendary mayor of New York City, had a favorite way to keep in touch with his voters.

He liked to stand at subway stations, bus stops and public squares, shake hands with passersby and ask, “How’m I doin’?” He got unfiltered firsthand feedback. It helped him win election three times.

What if Israel followed Koch’s method? What if Israel stood in front of a metaphorical mirror, the 5776 mirror, and asked itself, “How are we doing?” Here is Marketplace’s response, done annually at the advent of the new year, when serious soul-searching becomes the order of the day.

All in all, Israel and its citizens are doing fine, better than you might deduce from the undiluted daily dose of bad news from the media. There is room for much optimism and hope – and a dark cloud or two just to make it interesting.

Happiness: With many in the Middle East drowning in a sea of misery, especially in Syria, Israel is an island of bliss. The OECD, an organization of 35 developed nations, has constructed the Better Life Index, which finds that “Israel is one of the top five happiest countries in the world.”

In 2016, Israelis rated their general satisfaction with life at an average of 7.4, on a 1-10 scale, just behind Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland and Finland. The US failed to make the top 10 for the fifth straight year.

Quoted by the Israel21c website, psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar, an expert on positive psychology, explained the happiness phenomenon.

“It’s because of our focus on relationships. Friends and family are very high up on our value scale... time we spend with people we care about and who care about us is the No. 1 predictor of happiness.”

According to the OECD, “86% of Israelis believe they know someone they could rely on in a time of need.”

I think there is another reason, too. Israel has the highest fertility rate among OECD countries. When there are lots of babies and children around, they give hope for the future.

In many developed countries, the population is actually shrinking because of low birth rates. Russia’s population, for instance, has been falling by some 750,000 annually for more than a decade.

These low-fertility countries have become virtual homes for the elderly.

According to the Israel Democracy Institute, while 74% of Israelis say their personal situation is “good” or “very good,” nearly 60% think the state of the state is so-so, bad or very bad. This dichotomy – “I’m fine, my country isn’t” – has been observed in most countries in the West.

In the same survey, some 84% of respondents said they are not interested in migrating to another Western country, even if they are offered citizenship and a job. This contrasts sharply with the hapless sea of humanity desperately seeking to migrate from the Mideast and Africa to Europe.

Health: Israelis are happy, in part, because they are fairly healthy. Average life expectancy is 82 years, two full years above the OECD average. When asked, “How is your health?” some 80% of Israelis reported they were in good health, well above the 69% OECD average.

Personal Security: Do you feel safe walking alone at night? For many, personal safety is a key part of well-being. In Israel, despite terrorist attacks, 66% of people say they feel safe, just slightly below the OECD average of 68%.

However, Israel’s homicide rate (murders per 100,000 inhabitants) is a low 1.8, far lower than the OECD average of 4.1. (That figure, however, does not include terror victims.) Economics: Israel’s Gross Domestic Product is \$300 billion, or more than \$33,000 per capita. Growth last year was

slow, just 2.5%, but speeded up to nearly 3% in the first half of 2016. The 2016 growth engines were private consumption, which grew 7.3%, and capital formation, which rose 13%. Unemployment in July was a record low 4.7%.

Israel ranks 21st in global competitiveness out of 60 countries that compete worldwide, but first in business R&D spending as a percent of GDP and in R&D researchers per capita, and second in scientific research.

It ranked 10th in the world in the Global Innovation Index.

One area in which Israel could improve a lot is in “ease of doing business,” a 10-variable indicator compiled yearly by the World Bank. It shows that in 2016, Israel dropped three rungs, to 53rd (out of some 200 countries). It is especially tough to get a construction permit (rank of 96th), register property (rank of 127th), pay taxes (103rd) and enforce a contract (77th). Ease of starting a business? The start-up nation ranks only 56th in that realm. This is inexcusable.

Another problem area is productivity. According to the Taub Center’s Picture of the Nation 2016 report, Israel’s productivity (output per hour of work) is lower than that of the OECD in all but hi-tech – and the gap is growing.

There is also an enormous gap in the distribution of wealth and income between rich and poor. The Gini coefficient, a measure of equality, declined further in 2016; Israel now ranks only 43rd among 60 globally competitive nations in distributive justice and has one of the least equal income distributions among Western nations.

For a society that needs internal social cohesion when facing external threats, such inequality is a clear and present danger.

Democracy: “A democratic Jewish state” has become an incessant mantra of the right-wing Netanyahu government. But, apparently, Israelis do not buy it. The Israel Democracy Index reports that the preference for the dual definition is “continuing to decline,” with only a quarter of Jewish respondents saying that both “Jewish” and “democratic” are equally important.

The same report found that Israelis feel increasingly powerless to influence government policy. Some 78% feel “unable to truly influence government policy” and only 19% trust the political parties “very much” or “quite a lot,” while just about a third trust the Knesset and government.

In contrast, there is high trust of the IDF, the president and the Supreme Court.

Israelis do vote. Some 75% cast ballots in the last national election, compared with the OECD average of 68% and only 58% for the United States.

Education: Some 85% of Israeli adults have completed high school, well above the OECD average of 76%. However, in the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures high school students’ achievement in math, science and reading, Israeli youth scored 474, well below the OECD average of 497.

Religion: The CIRI index (Cingranelli- Richards Human Rights Index) lumps Israel with China,

Iran, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, in its annual “freedom of religion” index. All get zero.

Why does Israel score so low, when you can worship precisely as you wish here? A leading Reform rabbi, Uri Regev, says it is because of “the practice of political parties buying power in exchange for capitulation to religious coercion, while ignoring the wishes of the majority.”

The recent brouhaha over emergency work on the Sabbath for infrastructure projects is an example; shifting the work to Friday and Saturday night will obstruct train service, for instance, for many.

Press Freedom: Israel got its lowest rating ever in 2016, dropping from “free” to “partly free” and ranking only 65th. The reason? Freedom House, which constructs the index, cited “the growing impact of Israel Hayom [the free daily paper], whose ownersubsidized business model endangered the stability of other media outlets, and the unchecked expansion of paid content – some of it government-funded – whose nature was not clearly identified to the public.”

The report also noted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s decision to serve as his own communications minister, giving him control over regulation of the communications market.

Environment: As a longtime resident of Haifa, where pollution from nearby refineries and chemical plants is a health risk, I’m concerned about this particular statistic that measures PM2.5, defined as atmospheric particulate matter (PM) that has a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometers, or about 3% of the diameter of a human hair. In Israel, atmospheric PM2.5 is 25.9 micrograms per cubic meter, one of the highest levels in the OECD and nearly double the OECD average of 14.1. These are the pollutants that wreak havoc with our lungs.

It’s Official: The “look in the mirror” idea has now become official. Over a year ago, in April 2015, the government adopted a resolution requiring the Central Bureau of Statistics to publish a well-being report annually. This report reflects all aspects of life, including personal security, jobs, health, housing, infrastructure, education, skills, cost of living, governance, democracy and civic engagement.

Dark Clouds: The darkest cloud I could find in the 5776 mirror was a recent statement by Tamir Pardo, ex-Mossad chief, someone uniquely equipped to assess looming dangers of all sorts.

In his first public statement since leaving office last June, he said, “The most pressing threat to Israel is not Iran, but the increased polarization within Israeli society. Internal division can lead us to civil war – we are already on a path toward that. If a society crosses a certain line in its division and hatred, it is a real possibility to see a phenomenon like a civil war.”

Throughout Jewish history, internal dissension has wrought destruction as great as or even greater than external threats. As we look toward the New Year 5777 with hope and a modest amount of justifiable pride, Pardo’s words of warning should be heeded by us all.

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