

HEBREW WITH A CHINESE ACCENT by Si Frumkin

I don't remember how long ago this was, just that it was on one of my visits to Israel and that I had a silly reaction to an insignificant incident. My Jerusalem taxi had stopped behind a large garbage truck. It was picking up the garbage from a Chinese restaurant when the owner came running out of the building, loudly complaining about something to the garbage man. A typical Israeli dialogue followed with much waving of hands, curses, and high volume screaming. The screaming was in Hebrew and the Chinese businessman was louder and more fluent than the European-looking garbage collector.

My first reaction was surprise: "Hebrew? The Chinese guy speaks Hebrew?" And then, "Well, why not? This is Israel. What else should he speak?"

There is the old conundrum about what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object. The problem with it is that the premise is wrong: there is no such thing as an immovable object. It may take time, effort and sacrifice but the irresistible force will prevail against it.

This is why I wasn't especially concerned with the recently deceased immigration bill. I was sure that the irresistible force could not be stopped by writing new laws, building fences or creating giant detention centers – the desperate, hungry, willing to work and adapt will keep coming. They will be driven by a belief that is not fueled by ideology or religious conviction – their goal is just to be given an opportunity to achieve better lives and a better future. In some cases, it is a question of survival – the Haitians and the Cubans who illegally cross the seas in rickety boats to America and the Chinese, Africans, East Europeans and Filipinos who illegally cross deserts and pay off smugglers to get to Israel.

America was built by immigrants who came here when there were no restrictions. Many were inspired by the tall tales of those who had come before them and some were disappointed and went back. Most stayed, worked, adopted America and were adopted by it – they assimilated! They didn't come to create a new Germany, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Poland or Russia – they came to become

Americans, to be a part of the melting pot that produced a new nationality, a new culture, a new attitude that was unlike any other.

Eventually rules were introduced. Some races and ethnicities were less welcome than others and there were limitations and regulations to be observed. From time to time laws changed but, throughout, the numbers were almost constant. Those who couldn't come in legally came illegally. They cannot be stopped.

There is a remarkable similarity in this between the U.S. and Israel - the two outstanding democracies that revere individual freedom and human rights. Both are facing influxes of illegal immigrants that present serious human, economic and moral problems. Israel is currently faced with a population of estimated 200,000 illegal immigrants. Since American population is 60 times that of Israel, this is almost exactly equivalent to the estimated 12,000,000 American illegals. Just like America, Israel is unable to round up and deport all of them and, just like in America, most of them are gainfully employed, at low wages, doing the work that "real" Israelis – most of whom are descended from immigrants - are reluctant to do.

Since the intifada there were numerous attempts by Palestinian workers – some successful – to murder Israelis. This resulted in a drastic reduction of Palestinian workers allowed to work in Israel and an increased inflow of illegal immigrants from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe with some paying as much as \$15,000 to be smuggled across the Sinai desert by Arab "coyotes".

Not all illegals come to Israel seeking work. There are several thousand refugees from Sudan who escaped to Israel from Egyptian refugee camps to avoid being returned to Sudan to face certain death. There are several hundred – or more – gays who fled to Israel from persecution in the Muslim countries. There are the descendants of the 200 Vietnamese boat people who fled the North Vietnamese and were accepted by Israel – maybe the Chinese guy fighting with the garbage man was really Vietnamese?

All this confirms my belief that there are only two kinds of countries: the *bad* ones that will not let their people leave and the *good* ones that cannot stop all the

people that want to come in. Unfortunately, it is the latter that are now being criticized, demeaned, legislated against, boycotted and declared be threats to peace by Europe and the like. So why is it that so many want to come there and are willing to sacrifice to do so?

I wonder.

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