

WHEN MOSES WAS IN EGYPT LAND... Si Frumkin

“I thought I would have no trouble finding him,” Ari said. “How many black pastors can there be at an Israeli celebration on a Sunday? But I never thought there would be so many people here...”

He tried his cellphone again and shrugged – no answer.

Ari was right. The crowd was probably more than 6 or 7 thousand, overflowing the 3 blocks of Wilshire Boulevard where the Israeli consulate is. It was the weekend before Rosh Hashana and we had come to see and celebrate the raising of the Israeli flag in front of the consulate’s building. The three flagpoles – for the flags of America, California and Israel waited for the ceremony, the crowd sang to the music from the stage that was filled with celebrities – politicians, actors, rabbis – and everyone seemed to have a small Israeli flag to wave.

Ari, an Israeli friend who is very active in the Israel Christian Nexus, told me that he had invited the black pastor to bring some of his congregation to the event and that he wanted to speak to them about Israel and its relationship with the black community. “I want them to know that the only time that Africans were taken out of Africa not to slavery, but to freedom was when Israel brought Ethiopian Jews there,” he said. “So many of the African Americans, if they even know what and where Israel is, think of it as an apartheid state, a cruel, oppressive, militant oppressor of unfortunate Palestinians. It is sad but this is what they get from the media. Their leaders have forgotten the Jews who fought for civil rights, the Freedom Raiders in the 1960s, the Jewish kids that were murdered in the South by the KKK. “

Ari’s phone rang, he listened, smiled. “They are here”, he said.

We found them at the edge of the crowd, looking somewhat overwhelmed by the tumult, the crowd, the noise. There were about 20 of them, young men and women, looking curiously at the happy crowd.

Ari spoke to them for a few minutes about Israel, about the memorial for Martin Luther King that will be built in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem, about the black Ethiopian Jews who came to Israel illiterate and now have children graduating from universities, and then someone tapped his shoulder and whispered something. Ari stopped and said, "I am sorry, I have to leave for a few minutes". And then, he smiled at them. "I am leaving Si with you. He will tell you a little about being a slave when he was just a kid. I think you'll find it interesting..." And he hurried away.

I hadn't expected to be asked to speak. I had no idea what to say or where to begin, how to hold their interest. And then it came to me.

"I was sentenced to death when I was 10 years old. And so was my mother, my father, all my friends and all my relatives. I never knew when the execution would be – today, tomorrow, in a few months, a few years? But we all knew that the sentence was there. The Nazis had decided that Jews were inferior human beings who had to die. But, there was a war on, the German men were away fighting and they needed people to do the work, so some of us were left alive to do slave labor. When the war was won and the men came back – the Jews would die. A dead Jew is better than a live Jew, they said.

"We were not the only ones who were seen as inferior. Blacks were just as inferior as Jews, maybe even more so. The only reason blacks were not killed in great numbers in Europe was because there were no great numbers of blacks there."

My audience was spellbound.

I told them of the 400 or so children with German mothers and black African French soldier fathers in the Rhineland that had been occupied by the French after World War I. They were murdered as soon as the French left and Hitler came to power. I told them of the black GIs in World War II who were taken prisoner by the Germans and not sent to POW camps – they were shot or sent

to concentration camps to die with the Jews. I told them of the mutilated bodies of black GIs found by Americans in liberated cities.

I told them of being liberated by the Americans at the age of 14, after my father died in Dachau. I told them that Jews knew all about slavery - they had been enslaved throughout history, most recently in the Holocaust - and that the songs about the Pharaoh and Egypt that gospel choirs sing tell the story of Jewish slaves 3000 years ago.

I would have told them more but the sound of the shofar stopped me. The three flags were being raised; I joined in singing the anthems of America and Israel. There was joy and pride in the air and the black kids hugged and thanked me. I hope they will remember what they had seen and heard.