

A NIGHT AT THE FORUM

By Si Frumkin

I hate it when women cry. But not this time. I looked at the row of seats and saw them – tears pouring, arms spread wide. But they were smiling. Their tears were tears of joy, not sorrow.

Joy filled the enormous auditorium. It washed over the five thousand Latinos and blacks, Jews and Christians, Israelis and Americans, soldiers and civilians, rabbis and pastors, diplomats, politicians, and just ordinary folk who joined that Wednesday evening in the Forum in Inglewood to celebrate Israel's 60th birthday – or as Zev Yaroslavsky said in presenting a plaque to the three Israeli heroes who had made the survival of Israel possible, "It isn't just 60 years, it is three thousand and sixty!"

The Forum no longer hosts the important athletic events or features gymnasts and basketball players from the Soviet Union as it did in the past, when we would stage demonstrations for Soviet Jews there. It was bought several years ago by the Faithful Central Bible Church. Its five thousand strong, mostly black evangelical congregation, meets there to study, to pray, to help the community and, yes, to express its love for Israel, the Jews and our common traditions.

The Jews were the guests there on May 21. Our host, Bishop Kenneth C. Ulmer, a Christian Zionist who offered his church for Israel's birthday as a birthday present greeted us with a blessing, looked down from the stage and said that he was troubled.

"I shall quote King David's psalm 100 to you," he said. "King David said to make a noise, a joyful noise unto the Lord. Where is the noise?"

And the auditorium broke out in an uproar of cheers, cries, laughter and joy that surely was heard by Him at Whom it was directed. And then, when the noise quieted down someone in the back rows started singing "Happy Birthday" and then more joined in and soon the crowd, laughing, sang "Happy Birthday, Israel!"

The choirs – one from our host Church, directed by Barbara Allen, and the other, the L.A. Jewish Festival Choir, directed by the incomparable Noreen Green, the director of the L.A. Jewish Symphony, sang songs in Hebrew and in English and the audience sang along and clapped hands and some danced in the aisles.

On stage were the dignitaries – rabbis, pastors, members of the diplomatic corps, leaders of the Jewish community and the Heroes of Israel, the three Watchmen of Israel, who flew in for the evening. They were joined onstage by another hero, our own Israeli general, Shimon Erem, who for years has been tirelessly cultivating the friendship between Jews and Christians. He founded Israel Christian Nexus, (ICN) that has inspired the cooperative pro-Israel activities among Christians throughout the world, motivated hundreds of thousands of Christians to visit Israel, raised millions to build water reservoirs in the Negev and steered thousands of Christians teenagers to study in Israel and then spread the word throughout America.

The Israeli soldiers were Shimon's friends and colleagues from long ago: Lt. General Moshe Yaalon, former Chief of Staff of the IDF, who joined the IDF as a private and rose to the highest rank in Israel; Brigadier General Dovik Tamari who was the Chief of the Special Forces, the Chief Intelligence Officer and is one of the most decorated Israeli soldiers; and Colonel Shimon Cahaner who led the paratroopers who re-captured and united Jerusalem in 6-Day War.

There were speeches and presentations – all of them warm and meaningful, by Christians and by Jews, speaking of the love and support for Israel, of Jerusalem that must and will remain Jewish, of the need for cooperation and mutual help.

There were short visual videos presented by the multi talented Phil Blazer on Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, the history of Israel and the early pioneers. Cantor Marcelo Gindlin, a native of Argentina, sang and danced liturgical prayers and folk songs in Ladino – dancing like a flamenco professional as the audience clapped in rhythm and the Jewish choir accompanied him.

Pastor Jim Tolle of La Iglesia En El Camino addressed the audience in Spanish. There were several hundred Latino Evangelical Christians to celebrate Israel and it was among them that I saw the women who were crying, moved by the evening and its message of mutual love, mutual need and mutual help.

The audience broke into cheers and applause when ICN president, Rabbi Isaac Jeret, introduced pastor Robert Stearns of the Eagles' Wings Ministries whose organization sends hundreds of Christian young men and women to Israel to study every year. Back in the States many are already working as interns to politicians and on college campuses as pro-Israel activists. Robert didn't speak of his organization and the wonderful things it does. He sang. He sang "Yerushalaim Shel Zahav" – "Jerusalem of Gold" – in Hebrew – and the audience sat quietly, in awe of the beautiful voice and then joined him in the refrain.

And so ended the largest and most unique celebration of Israel's 60th anniversary. There was much more to talk about and people to mention – the beautiful and ubiquitous Dina Leeds and her husband Fred who chaired the event, Gary Dalin and Patricia Johnson who did most of the work, the wonderful and generous contributors – too many to mention them all.

Happy 60th Birthday, Israel! I hope that even more will come to celebrate the 61st!