MR. JACOB BLAUSTEIN, honorary president of the American Jewish Committee, introduced Ambassador Abba Eban, recalling high points of Mr. Eban’s diplomatic career in which he displayed unparalleled eloquence, courage and brilliance. As a farewell tribute, Mr. Blaustein presented the Ambassador with a crystal bowl “from the American Jewish Committee, with profound esteem and abiding affection,” and wished him the utmost “fulfillment in the brilliant future that awaits.”

Reflections on the American Scene

BY ABBA EBAN
Israel’s Ambassador to the U.S. and Representative to the U.N.

Mr. Chairman Sonnabend, Past, Present and Future Presidents of the American Jewish Committee: I am now being borne across this continent on a torrent of praise. I advise each of you to threaten to leave your present abode, if you wish, while still alive, to receive a flattering impression of what your neighbors and friends think of you.

I am moved by the graceful words with which Jacob Blaustein has greeted me. Some of you must have seen my countenance passing through the spectrum of expressions familiar to those undergoing ordeal by eulogy: blushing diffidence, modest dissociation—and an occasional guilty flash of satisfaction and agreement. I shall not even attempt to contradict his glowing words of introduction.

After all, Jacob Blaustein would not have been elected repeatedly as president of the American Jewish Committee, or appointed by the President of the United States as a representative to the United Nations, unless he were recognized to be a man of sound and accurate judgment. What can I do, therefore, but bow in docile submission to his verdict?
As a pure-minded diplomat, I could, perhaps, afford to reject such eulogies; but as a political aspirant, I am told I cannot afford to regard any praise of myself as excessive.

Nobody can now deny me the right of reciprocity. I should like in full sincerity to bring a tribute of affectionate gratitude to the American Jewish Committee for all that it has meant to us as we have trodden the common road of Jewish history.

At the great moment of transition in the life of our tormented people, at the time when it was dazed and battered by unprecedented slaughter, the American Jewish Committee stood with the group of leaders who took control of our people's destiny. No one will ever forget how you stood in vigilant brotherhood at the cradle of our emergent statehood; and how you helped us lay the foundations of our international status and of our crucial friendship with the Government and people of the American Republic.

Faithful to your own American principles and to your sentiments of Jewish brotherhood, you were able to play an indispensable role.

From those turbulent days in 1948, when Joseph Proskauer was so valued a bridge in the relations between our two governments; during the many years when Jacob Blaustein's vigorous diplomatic talent was devoted to the cause of American-Israeli amity; and throughout the distinguished period of Irving Engel's presidency, Israel's cause has been attended by your counsel and sympathy. I do not doubt that this tradition is destined to flourish and endure.

I am now near the end of a journey which began eleven years ago, when I first came to the United Nations to plead for Israel's rights of sovereignty, statehood, peace and self-defense. That journey broadened out into another highway two years later, when I was dispatched to Washington bearing letters of credence from President Weizmann to the President, Government and people of the United States, bidding me labor for the establishment and reinforcement of friendly relations between these two democracies, so different in all the elements of their
physical strength, but so mysteriously linked by the memories of a common historic experience.

They have been unforgettable years: years touched by tragedy and exaltation—years which began with our people stunned by grief as it stood before the charred remains of six million of our kin; and years which now end with our sovereign nation striding proudly towards the fulfilment of its destiny.

It is natural that a warrior leaving an arena such as this, after an epoch so full of travail and color, should find many crowded memories arising before his mind. Some of my most vivid memories belong to Israel's exploits and progress in the United Nations. I cannot forget our moments of frustration and defeat in the international tribunal.

But when all is said and remembered, Israel has gained far more from her association with this union of sovereign peoples than she has ever lost in occasional moments of disillusionment and defeat. I know not what the story of our Jewish generation would have been if Israel's desperate leap forward towards freedom had not intersected with another line of historic development—that which brought into existence an international forum in which international problems could be discussed in terms transcending the interests and strategy of any single nation.

Moreover, our people has learned, throughout its long, historic journey, that ideas have an independent value irrespective of defects in their implementation. There is no concept in the modern world of ideas which conforms more closely with Israel's prophetic tradition or with her hopes of freedom, than this majestic design of a family of nations joined together in a covenant of justice and peace.

I therefore lay down this part of my mission in the conviction that Israel owes gratitude to the United Nations, and reverent honor to its flag.

A similar verdict comes to my lips as I look back on the other arena in which I have been my country's sentinel. Words cannot express the value which American sustenance and support have brought to Israel throughout the years of her ordeal.
America was first to recognize Israel; first to define our independence and integrity as essential elements of her own international policy; first to sponsor Israel’s recognition as worthy of emulation by other nations; first to proclaim and first to uphold our crucial right of free and innocent passage across the Gulf of Aqaba—thus forming the bridge on which we have constructed our new fraternity with the continents of Asia and Africa; first and unique in the massive infusion of aid which she has injected into the veins and arteries of our economy, society and culture; main citadel and central reservoir of our public sympathies and our Jewish solidarities. In all of these acts of friendship America has shed a gracious light upon our early years.

Jerusalem and Washington have not always seen everything alike. But on the substantive, crucial, fundamental issues—of our sovereignty, our survival, our statehood, our right to recognition, our membership in the international community, our hope for economic and social progress—there has been a constant stream of American policy and sentiment flowing along the road of our salvation.

As I lay down my mission to America I am convinced that there are no differences between the governments of the United States and Israel which cannot be resolved by tenacious and friendly discussion. For the theme of the American-Israel dialogue no longer bears on the more crucial issues of our statehood, our integrity or our consolidation. These have been common ground between us for several years.

There is far less of crisis and tension in our relations than a nervous and volatile press would sometimes have us believe. Indeed, our problems spring not from incompatibility, but from perplexity—a perplexity common to America and Israel, as each faces the torrential gusts of conflict and passion in the Arab world.

America and Israel, as members of the democratic family of nations, have much to gain from contemplation of each other. Can Israel’s rise fail to strike a chord of memory in the heart of any American who still cherishes the saga of his own revolution? Surely our nascent society, despite its own unique and specific
attributes, is in essence a repetition in miniature of the sweeping events whereby America was built through the immigration and pioneering movements of her formative years.

Israel has been much contemplated by Americans. Envoys, economists, tourists, commissions, senators, representatives, writers, movie producers—all have examined us, up and down. Israel has been bombarded with praise, criticism and, above all, unlimited advice.

No nation has ever sustained such a constant barrage of counsel. Only a rugged people could have survived.

Until this evening we have never retaliated. There is no literature on what Israel thinks of America—how the contemporary life of your nation reflects itself in our eyes. There is a rich tradition of comment left by emissaries from other lands. Many, even the brilliant de Tocqueville and the perceptive Bryce, fell victim at times to the utter incalculability of a society too vast and turbulent for portrayal, let alone for prediction.

No one could fail to be awed by the sheer vastness of American life; by the majestic grandeur of her landscape—the vastness of her hills, the endless expanse of her valleys; the inimitable variety of her peoples; the mysterious processes of her union, creating the tapestry of a new civilization out of so many variant and seemingly conflicting threads. The genius of her freedom and the overpowering element of her size create a condition in which almost every generalization can be at once true and misleading. Nor is her true temper always visible on the surface of her life.

America is thus the most studied and the least understood of nations. Anyone who goes through this literature becomes sharply aware that the final answer has not been given. The forecast of America’s destiny still challenges the political scholarship of our times.

I am the son of a nation which has had many prophets in its history. All of them have got into serious trouble. I do not offer you my reflections without knowing the acute necessity of treading warily.

I see before me a growing society. The United States to which
I came in 1948 was a people of 140 million in 48 states. Today there are 175 million in 50 states. Thus, within a short period in the lifetime of a man still far short of decrepitude, America has increased by numbers not far less than the total population of a great European power.

Even at the apparent pinnacle of her strength, America is still commanded by the laws of growth. This is still a young society, even though it controls the greatest aggregate of material power ever assembled under any government amongst men.

The consequences are manifold and fundamental. A growing people is not shackled by the dead hand of tradition. Its eyes are on the perspectives which lie ahead, not on the journey it already accomplished.

This forward-looking outlook is specifically and uniquely congenial to Israel's tradition and temperament. All civilizations contemporary with ancient Israel had in their legend and philosophy the concept of a golden age in which the conflicts between order and freedom were transcended. But each placed its golden age in the past, at the very beginning of history. When they compared the past perfection with the failures and ills of their own existence, they were plunged into a deep melancholy. Human life appeared to them as a futile repetition, a wheel going round and round, coming back to a starting point in darkness and chaos.

But Israel in a burst of lucid and revolutionary genius put this golden age in the future, and thus conceived of history as unfolding itself across time in a pattern of progress. This was the deep purport of Jewish Messianism. Whether directly through the ancient Jewish stream or through its vast Christian tributary, America has maintained this forward-lookingness as her most characteristic attribute of temper and spirit.

In the old world, other civilizations once more powerful than the United States have long ceased to advance or, at most, advance slowly and with difficulty. America is a society still moving swiftly in a continual growth to which the resources of this continent set no visible limit.

Beyond this strong impression of growth, I have observed
the enlargement and deepening of American libertarianism. It is visible in the crumbling of barriers between America’s own races and classes, and in her active sponsorship of national freedom in the awakening continents of Asia and Africa.

Nothing more important can be said about America, than that it is the central fortress of democracy. When de Tocqueville wrote his treatise, he made it clear that he was not writing about America at all. He said, “I confess that in America I saw more than America. I saw the image of democracy itself!”

America, as conceived by its founders, was not yet a nation with deep historic roots or a clearly defined cultural personality. The Declaration of Independence hardly speaks of creating an American nation. It was concerned with a people deprived of freedom and the object was to create a society in which men could be liberated from each other. From all over the world men would come to America—not to be Americans, but to be free.

Later, of course, a national temperament and character were to emerge. But nationalism was only the second phase in the development of American society. Freedom was the purpose of its existence; and freedom set the horizons of its progress.

Israel, too, is born of an idea—the idea of historic reunion between a people, a land and a language. When they lived together, these three achieved an incomparable burst of intellectual and spiritual radiance; and in coming together again, they may well recreate their previous greatness.

Because democracy is an inherent and organic part of America’s very existence, nothing is more important for other free nations, great and small, than the manner in which democracy vindicates itself here. America is the crucial laboratory; if democracy fails here to realize its full potentialities, where else will it prosper?

As we look around the world we find our democratic idea embattled and defensive. It has its sanctuary in the American hemisphere. It still exists on the northern and western fringes of Europe. There is an occasional lonely outpost in Asia and Africa. But let us not forget that the majority of the world’s population
is governed by autocratic, authoritarian and despotic regimes. Democracy is a minority system of government and culture in the world.

Let us remember with awe that between the decline of the Athenian city-state and the American Declaration of Independence, not a single democracy with any general scope of influence was established anywhere across the face of the globe. If, in this land, democracy can reconcile freedom with security, all mankind will follow that light. If democracy fails here, it has no future in the world.

Those throughout the world who conceive democracy to be the highest expression of man's social personality cannot regard America's destiny as that of a foreign state. Multitudes everywhere are deeply affected by the currents of your life.

I hold the constitutional genius of her fathers to be by far the most impressive of America's achievements—more so, I venture to suggest, even than the rivers of material abundance which have been made to gush forth from the infinite sources of her wealth and enterprise.

The issue for humanity is not whether it can have freedom or abundance—but whether it can have both, united in a joyous equilibrium between individual enterprise and social discipline. Here, I believe, the example of America will be more important than her exertions. Democracy cannot be imported; it cannot, of course, be sold or enforced. It can only be radiated by the inherent strength of a successful example.

That is why the great constitutional issues in your Republic—civil rights and the full flowering of a democratic society—are not essentially domestic issues. They affect international issues of awesome scope.

Israel herself has recently seen something of the dynamic force of example. There is now a great pilgrimage to Israel from representatives of some 20 nations in Asia and Africa, younger in their independence than we. They are seeking to draw upon our accumulated resources of pioneering, to find out how our small people has managed to reconcile political liberty
with economic dynamism from an austere starting point of scarcity and travail.

If Israel can communicate to other nations something of the lessons of her democracy; and if, as a result, awakening Africa and Asia make their choice for freedom and not for despotism, Israel will have rendered a service to the free world far greater than all the aid she has received.

We thus find our country in the position of being at once the recipient and the donor of aid within the concert of the democratic family of nations. There is no real contradiction in this double capacity.

I have spoken of growth and of democracy. What is there to say of the intellectual scene? All my predecessors in the daring task of analyzing America have acknowledged that Americans are not a contemplative people. It is the practical instinct that has mattered most here: the capacity to blaze a trail, build a railroad, convert villages to cities, fertilize abandoned lands, tame the adverse forces of nature.

There was little time in all these years to sit back and look upon the scene as a whole, to generalize experience into laws of thought. But those who agree that America has shown no inclination toward philosophy in theoretical terms, have acknowledged her consistent and almost intuitive tendency to follow a logical and moral system of conduct, dictated by the exigencies of life and by an essentially religious consciousness.

America's friends hope that amidst the bustle and turmoil of your nation's life, there will always be cloisters in which men can think not only of action, but also of the larger issues of human purpose; and that out of America's political and economic leadership an intellectual and spiritual fertility will grow.

I have said that Americans are a religious people; and this is the fourth of my impressions. I do not refer here to the formal background of denominational religion. I refer to the belief that all human action must be related to absolute standards of conduct, and that whatever a man performs upon earth must be acted in the sight of eternity.
The contribution of the Hebrew stream of thought to American civilization has been greatly underestimated. It is significant that Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, when they were discussing the seal of the American Union shortly to be established, recommended that it should portray the Children of Israel fleeing across the parted waters of the Red Sea, on their way to liberty. And they proposed that the slogan and title of this seal should contain the uncannily Hebraic concept: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God."

My fifth impression relates to America's swift rise to international responsibility. Nothing more spectacular has taken place in the life of our times than America's emancipation from a tradition of detachment and isolation, and her emergence to the assumption of leadership in freedom's embattled cause.

Across the 39 states of this Union through which I have journeyed, endeavoring to expound some of the ideas and impulses which have led to Israel's establishment, I have found an alert and lively interest in the affairs of the outside world. If there are any bulwarks of isolationism left, they can be only in the states which, through inadvertence, I have not visited.

I find an American people which believes that its partnership with other nations in a world of freedom is a permanent covenant and not the accidental consequence of the Second World War.

There are many, of course, who draw attention to errors in policy or diplomacy. Precisely because the American example is so crucial, anything that seems to be a deviation from prudence or wisdom evokes a reaction of almost shuddering fear. But none in the family of free nations believes that the cause of liberty can have any other leader, or that the ultimate fortress of the free world's cause can be established anywhere than here, upon the foundations of the incomparable strength and abundance of the American Union.

A brief time has elapsed since the age when the United States had no reason to care about the world beyond the oceans, when avoidance of foreign entanglements appeared to be the first law of prudence. Today America exercises an intricate duty of
leadership in the family of the free world. The progress toward mature understanding of international issues and responsibilities has been miraculously swift.

There were others before you, notably Britain and France in the age of European ascendancy and colonial expansion, who exercised leadership in inter-nation coalitions. But history allowed them to evolve over centuries of time toward assumption of that responsibility. Through these centuries of trial and error, their perceptions were sharpened and their diplomatic faculties were developed.

In the United States, the transition from a virtual backwater, in terms of international responsibility, to the very summit of leadership was accomplished almost overnight.

Let me not so betray the spirit of other nations as to indicate that I believe America has nothing to learn in the field of political or diplomatic leadership. But an historic appraisal must deal with processes, not with intermediate consequences. The American people is now increasingly aware that it must live within a world society of which it is an integral part, not within the walls of a sheltered continent.

Nothing has taught this more acutely than the recent scientific revolution. The conquest of space and the perfection of missiles have destroyed the old distinction between "safe" and "vulnerable" nations, between those in the first line of fire and those who, in benevolence and condescension, could previously decide whether or not to rescue more vulnerable nations from peril.

Today, New York, San Francisco and Philadelphia are just as safe or just as vulnerable as Rotterdam, London, Coventry and Paris—and, yes, Haifa or Tel Aviv. Every nation is joined to every other nation in a covenant of mutual vulnerability.

To take part in the defense of a world order and of a family of free nations is therefore not an act of condescension, but the dictate of enlightened self-interest.

Amongst all the gifts which America can give to the world
there are three from which young nations, and Israel in particular, can derive inspiration.

The first is your innate genius for freedom under law, the conviction that democracy is the highest expression of a dignified social order.

The second is your talent for harmonizing diversities; nowhere until the establishment of Israel has there been a commensurate triumph in creating a national personality which seeks the enrichment of varied cultural sources.

The third is your belief in the affirmative qualities of technology and science—your conviction that the true expression of the scientific age lies in its response to the compassions and utilities of mankind.

There is one feature of American life about which neither de Tocqueville nor Bryce said a word. Neither of them spoke of the American Jewish community. You would hardly expect a similar reticence in me. American Jewry has stood in the very center of my experience.

American Jews, more than others, have seen the true quality of our enterprises. They have understood that Israel is not a small nation. A nation can be small in geography but very great in history. Ancient Israel was surrounded by empires which exceeded her in material wealth, in military power and in the sophistication and refinement of their arts. But all of these empires crumbled into ruin and oblivion, while this small people of shepherds and farmers became the first to see the vision of a united creation; to become aware of invisible forces at work upon the human scene; to rebel against the apathy, determinism and resignation of all other civilizations; to proclaim that history has meaning, that the human journey has a direction and that its signposts point forever forward and upward.

From the moment that the people of Israel first comes within view, history is face to face with a people of intensive genius, touched by a rich and joyous vision of human destiny.

American Jews, more than other Americans, are aware of these elements of past history. They have been able to look upon
Israel with a true eye of historic comparison. Israel owes American Jewry a similar benevolence of appraisal.

I believe in the survival of American Jewry. I believe in its organic membership in the pattern of American civilization. My perception leads me to the conclusion that American Jewry is not something grafted onto the existing structure of an American nation, but is simultaneous with its birth and growth, and totally inseparable from its destiny.

The founders of our own national movement constructed an ideology which was based on a somber but accurate diagnosis of the untenability of Jewish life in Europe. Who can look upon our six million graves and say they were wrong? But this was a prophecy of Europe. Our founding fathers had no ideology about American Jewry, for it did not come across the horizons of their experience and perception.

I do not believe that the concept of every Jewish community outside Israel passing inexorably to doom or decline can be the basis of a covenant of trust between Israel and the Jewish people. Inevitable anti-Semitism is no longer the basic premise of Israel's hopes of advancement.

I believe that we must look for a partnership based on a more equal and more affirmative concept: we and our children will live in a world in which a growing Israel will live side by side with an American Jewish community which will also grow forever stronger, not only in its inherent vigor, but also in the resilience and vitality of its Jewish consciousness and institutions.

The florescence of American Jewish institutions is not something alien to Israel's destiny. Assistance for Israel will not emerge from an American Jewish community which shows debility in its autonomous Jewish life or weakness and fragility in its culture.

I have not hesitated to tell my fellow citizens that Israel has no cause whatever to look at American Jewry with reproach because you presume to exist outside the framework of our statehood. Still less do I think we should surround you with predictions of your inevitable extinction.

I cannot imagine any circumstances in which weakness and
disaster could come to American Jewry, without weakness and
disaster coming to Israel as well. This, I think, is the covenant
we have with each other—mutual and parallel growth and
strength, together with the establishment of bridges of inter-
action and fraternal sentiment.

My only thought for American Jews, therefore, is one of
fervent prayer for their continued welfare, for the deepening
of their harmonious relations with all their fellow citizens,
within the framework of their common American civilization.

I have thought of you much in these eleven years. I know
that whoever speaks for Israel holds a collective Jewish prestige
and trust within his hands. For what is modern Israel except the
expression of a universal Jewish prestige? I have never ascended
the rostrum of nations without echoing the prayer so appropriate
for the envoys of our people: "Eternal God, safeguard my tongue
from error." For on the consequences of this error might hang
the trust and the fate of history's most anguished people.

I take away with me as my proudest conviction—I pray that
it be a just conviction—that you, the Jews of America, and I
have understood each other very deeply.

In gratitude, therefore, in affection—in memory everlasting
—I bid you farewell.