

Israel on YouTube

By Samuel L. Blumenfeld

It seems that just about everyone in Israel with a digital camera and computer has posted a video clip on YouTube, which permits the viewer to see Israel as it is never portrayed in the press or on the evening news: a very normal country. In fact, the videos show Israel as a dynamic, high-tech Western society, built on the premise that life is to be enjoyed and lived fully.

But the videos that are attracting the most international attention are the musical ones, products of Israel's remarkable pop music culture. An Irish viewer, commenting on one of these videos, wrote: "Israeli Jews are among the best looking, toughest, and sexiest men and women on earth, and their music is happy, romantic, a joyous expression of a powerful people who've survived despite all efforts to destroy them."

Another viewer wrote: "I am Chinese from Malaysia but I love Hebrew songs! They are so soothing and nice to listen to."

And many of these viewers want to know the meaning of the Hebrew lyrics. Some videos provide the lyrics in Latinized Hebrew. If ever there develops an international movement to learn Hebrew, it will be because of the songs and the attractive Israelis who sing them.

In fact, one male Israeli singer has already attracted so much international adoration that, if all goes well, he is destined to become a great international star. He is Harel Skaat, a young performer of Yemeni background, of whom one viewer wrote: "[He] is the most amazing singer in the world." To prove the veracity of this statement, just watch him sing Kol Htziporim and Tzavta.

That view is shared by fans all over the world, with comments from Australia, the Philippines, Romania, Serbia, Moscow, Catalonia, and other Spanish speaking countries. There are even viewers from Iran. But I wonder how many American Jews have heard of him.

And virtually no Americans have heard of Shlomo Artzi, a kind of Israeli Frank Sinatra, who packs them in at outdoor concerts in Caesaria. Shlomo's relaxed style and affectionate antics create an exciting emotional kinship between singer and audience. Watch him sing Tzavta and you may start thinking of making Aliya just to become part of this incredible Israeli fun.

Watching and listening to all of these benign videos, it's hard to believe that Israel has been besieged, boycotted, and hated by much of the Muslim world for over 60 years. Yet, none of this has dampened the optimism of Israelis. It has, in fact, strengthened the Jewish nation's resolve to survive and prosper. Thus, while the American economy is going to pot under the liberal regime in Washington, Israel has a conservative government that is steering the country very nicely through the global economic storm. That too is encouraging Aliya from the U.S. and Canada.

This year, Tel Aviv is celebrating its 100th anniversary, and there are many videos showing the founding of the city in 1909 on the sand dunes north of Jaffa and its incredible growth into a Mediterranean metropolis with skyscrapers and freeways. Its beaches, palm trees, and modern high-rise apartments and hotels remind one of Los Angeles. In short, Tel Aviv, which throbs to the drumbeat of today's popular music, is a triumph of Zionism. After all, the aim of Herzl and other Zionist pioneers was to create a "normal" Jewish country. And normal it is, with beautiful girls in bikinis, surfers, and TV talk shows just as in California. But in Israel they all speak Hebrew, another great Zionist triumph.

It is quite remarkable to hear the ancient and sacred language of the Bible applied to the singing of pop tunes and romantic ballads by young Israelis who make the language sound as romantic as English or French. Yiddish, the language of an oppressed people, could have never been adapted to these lilting romantic songs that permeate modern Israeli culture. This music, in fact, along with Hebrew, have become the unifying glue of the whole younger generation of Israelis.

What a pleasant sight it is for an old American Zionist to see Israeli teenagers singing modern romantic songs in groups. Their body language bespeaks of freedom, a love of life, generosity, kindness, happiness and sadness. They are a generation of Jews the world has never seen before, speaking Hebrew as it has not been heard for over two thousand years. Their fresh faces, affectionate nature, and casual dress exude cultural and national confidence. They are very much at home in Tel Aviv, the most tolerant city in the world, a creation of Zionists striving for normal Jewish life.

Israel now has a population of over seven million people, of whom six million are Jews. Despite unrelenting Arab hostility, boycotts, and terrorism, the Israelis have managed to build a very strong, vibrant country out of the sheer necessity of survival. And there are video clips that demonstrate this. One video of the Israeli Air Force is spectacular. It exudes macho confidence, chafing at the bit to take out the Iranian Hitler, Ahmadinejad. And, of course, some of the comments made by enemies of Israel are as vicious and vulgar as one would expect from rabid anti-Semites.

Another discovery on YouTube: the brilliant young Israeli conductor Noam Zur leading the Israeli Philharmonic in a great performance of Berlioz' *Symphonie Fantastique*. The video was made during the height of the second intifada, but you wouldn't know it by watching this young genius of a conductor. Since then, Zur has gone on to become the conductor of the Essen Symphony Orchestra in Germany.

Every aspect of Israel is on YouTube: Jerusalem, Haifa, Ashkelon, Eilat, Sderot, the Gaza war. There are lots of videos on Israel's history. There's an excellent series made by German television. Even some Israeli TV commercials have been posted. There is no end to it, and new videos are posted every day. You can even enjoy the experience of flying into Israel over Tel Aviv and landing at Ben Gurion Airport. Anyone can post a video on YouTube and they are being posted by the millions.

You can also take a ride on the Ayalon freeway through Tel Aviv. You are there in someone's car, listening to the radio, as the car speeds through traffic. It's hard to believe that only a hundred miles to the south is Gaza, ruled by terrorists determined to destroy the Jewish state.

Instead of turning Gaza into another Singapore or Hong Kong, their leaders dream of death and destruction.

This extraordinary new form of communication was launched in May 2005 by two young geeks, Steven Chen and Chad Hurley. They conceived of YouTube after being frustrated in trying to swap, online, video clips made at a party they had attended. And so, they made the system as simple as possible so that amateurs could use it. "Video democracy is here," Chad Hurley says, "and falling costs of transmission and a growing audience eager for the offbeat have empowered anyone with a laptop to create, review or alter almost any piece of digital entertainment in competition with the big guys."

YouTube now pumps out over 100 million short video clips--ranging from 1 to 30 minutes or even more--and takes in as many as 100,000 new ones every day. Of course there is a lot of nonsense on YouTube, but in a video democracy that's to be expected. YouTube has added a whole new dimension to communication by sound and film. It has become the new archive of record. For example, if you want to watch Sarah Palin explaining why she resigned as Governor of Alaska; if you want to see videos of the riots in Teheran; if you want to watch the Turkish prime minister walk out of a debate with Shimon Peres in Davos, they're all on YouTube.

As for Israel, it has made the Jewish nation accessible to anyone who wants to visit it, see its sights and hear its music. It also reveals Israel as a new land of opportunity not only for song writers and entertainers, but also for technological invention. It has become another "land of the free and home of the brave." And as America sinks into socialist economic chaos, Israel looks surprisingly inviting. And after listening to Harel Spaak sing, you'll no doubt say, "Only in Israel."