

Jews' feeling of collective identity helps explain relationship to Israel

The modern state of Israel "is a tangible witness to the eternality of Jewish life," according to a view presented by a national Jewish leader in a lecture in Mobile.

RABBI DANIEL POLISH, executive vice president of the Synagogue Council of America and spiritual leader of Beth Ami Synagogue in Potomac, Md., spoke in the latest meeting of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue at All Saints' Episcopal Church.

Polish said the Nazi Holocaust in World War II "meant the death of the Jewish people, and the state of Israel means its resurrection."

The rabbi talked about a Scriptural story in which Abraham was told by God to present his son Isaac as a burnt offering, and Abraham subsequently bound his son. However, God

intervened and did not allow the human sacrifice.

POLISH SAID THE state of Israel "is Isaac returned to life descending from his sacrificial pyre."

Individuals, the rabbi said, "live and die. There is none so righteous that they can escape the mortal decree, but the people of Israel lives forever."

He said, "Jews have always understood our history as the vehicle through which divine plans are worked out. Our collective life is inextricably intertwined with the will of God."

For Jews, according to the speaker, Israel "means that God still acts in the events of Jewish life, for nothing short of divine intervention can account for the rebirth of a Jewish state after Jews had been stateless for 2,000 years.

"The re-establishment of a nation for the Jewish people in their homeland is miraculous... It means more even than crawling out of the pit of European destruction. It means the redemption of 2,000 years of abnormal existence and the answer to 2,000 years of prayer."

BEFORE THE YEAR 72, Jews lived in their own land and were a nation, but they were scattered throughout the world by a conquering Roman army. Yet the Jewish people "continued to exist as a nation without a territory," said Polish.

"The Jewish people survived when it should have perished.... The longing for the restoration of the homeland was expressed in every worship service thrice daily and more on holy days. It was voiced in the grace at the conclusion of every meal."

JEWES AWAITED "NOT the dream of a perfect home in the beyond but the restoration of the terrestrial home of their ancestors.... Only comparatively recently did those sentiments translate themselves into political action," said Polish.

Elaborating on these ideas in an hour-long lecture, Polish said that Jewish prayer "appears markedly different from Christian prayer, and the Jewish understanding of sin and retribution is similarly different in one important respect.

"Christian prayer seems to me, an outside observer, to be predominantly in the first person with the emphasis on the individual and the individual's relationship to God.

"By the same token, Christian thought places great importance, at least to Jewish ears, on the matter of individual wrong-doing and the fate that individuals visit upon themselves as a consequence of their actions."

Said Polish, "Jewish liturgy, on the other hand, is largely couched in the plural. We hardly hear prayers in the Jewish tradition speak of 'me' or 'I.' We pray to our God and God of our fathers.... The unit of worship in the Jewish tradition is the group rather than the individual worshiper."

ACCORDING TO THE speaker, this "sense of collective identity is an important element in understanding" the Jewish view of the modern state of Israel.

When Jews read the Torah, or Scripture, that act "is like looking through the family scrapbook," said Polish. Modern Jews not only are reading about their ancestors but about themselves.

"The Torah for us underscores a sense of collectivity and participation and the totality of the people."

The story of the binding of Isaac in Scripture and the modern-day Holocaust, when millions of Jews were murdered, teach the precariousness of Jewish life, said Polish.

"IF ONE WANTS to know the Jew, one is compelled to face that cataclysm (the Holocaust) that has shaped the collective Jewish people.... Today's Jew cannot escape the haunting awareness of the evil that was done, done to us in our age. Even Jews who were not physically victims have nightmares about it, experience flashes of recognition of it, live in a ceaseless sense of connectedness to it."

The Jewish anguish about the Holocaust is not just about the victims, just as the Torah is not just about the ancestors of today's Jews. The Jewish feeling about the Holocaust and the Torah "is about ourselves."

POLISH CONCLUDED that "the issue of Jewish collective self-understanding is a necessary building block for an understanding of the theological role of the state of Israel."