

Independence Day

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Israel's Independence Day, Yom Ha'atzmaut, brings out the best and the worst in us. We cannot agree on what it means, and we cannot agree on how to celebrate or recognize it.

For all the biblical miracles, after 2,000 years of exile and oppression, the reconstitution of a Jewish independent state strikes me as the most miraculous of events that defies logic and nature. And I celebrate it. I cannot understand why any Jew would not.

In the Diaspora the vast majority are simply unaware of when Yom Ha'atzmaut is. Most of American Jews have never been to Israel, and many are ambivalent, if not downright opposed. But then the same can be said for quite a few Israeli Jews. On one level I support freedom of expression, free choice, and autonomy. But I do find it sad that to so many Jews history either means nothing or it is something they want to escape from.

I am a part of a very small people—some 15 million. I am part of a very small part of those 15 million who declare themselves to be religious Jews. And I am a small part of that small part that believes we should thank and praise the Lord for the miracle of Israel's existence.

But, as with anything to do with Jews, it is complicated. The Old Yishuv—Jews who settled in Israel during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries—sacrificed a lot to live in the Holy Land. They did not get involved in politics or agitate for self-rule. They thought that the Messiah would sort things out, and in the meantime they had to accept the facts of exile, subjugation, and second-class status with its humiliations and penalties.

Nineteenth century Zionism strove to actively liberate Jews and provide them with a safe haven. Secular, idealistic pioneers came to settle the land, drain swamps, and find a place to live in peace. The Old Yishuv disliked them for their secularism, politicism, and "loose morals". But in those days, the Old Yishuv was a small group of religious dreamers, and most of their successors are simply not interested in a Jewish state. God will take care of everything.

What we might call Modern, Centrist or Inclusive Orthodoxy has always been very supportive of Israel and celebrated independence religiously as well as nationally. They were the dominant religious force in the early years of the state and used the tools of statehood to give a religious dimension to a civil occasion. Once moderate, and pro-Zionist Orthodoxy was the norm for pragmatic, religious life in Israel. Nowadays religious moderates have almost all turned right. And they exercise power beyond their numbers in Israel, the army and its institutions being in league with secular right-wing parties.

Meanwhile, since the rise of the state, the ultra-Orthodox Charedi world has

grown exponentially. It is split three ways. Some participate in the activities of the state, its politics, and institutions. Others reject the state and Zionism ideologically, but still participate. Finally, a fringe group refuse to have anything to do with the state or to cooperate, and actively try to undermine it. There were a lot of Charedi men who served in the army in the early days of the state, and they celebrate independence privately. Chabad Chasidim, who do not consider themselves Zionists as such, recognize the day because of their strong support for the state and commitment to Jewish life in Israel. But most "black hatters" just ignore it. And some really weird ones treat it as a day of mourning. Sephardim overwhelmingly celebrate and the late great Sephardi Rav Ovadia Yosef said we should mark Yom Ha'atzmaut by studying Torah as well as enjoying the day.

The day before is Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day to honor those who were killed defending the country from its enemies. A moment of silence. Speeches and solemn gatherings. Interestingly, although the Charedi community as a rule does not celebrate Independence Day, more and more do take Memorial Day seriously and recognize the sacrifices that so many made for them as well. Only a few insensitive zealots refuse to mark the moment of silence in public.

On Yom Ha'atzmaut itself, the country rejoices in many ways. Marches, parades, displays, festivities, and a day off work. The vast majority of Israelis participate. But, bearing in mind that about half of Israelis are not religious, does it have any religious significance?

Both in Israel and beyond, each one of the groups I mentioned above have different religious responses to the day that really do illustrate how crazy we are. Please bear with me over the arcane details I am going to describe. To many they will sound petty and of little consequence, but the faithful take them very seriously—to the point of fisticuffs. But they illustrate the problems of a religion with no central or universally recognized authority.

According to Jewish law, whenever there is religious holiday we recite a prayer called Hallel, which is simply a collection of joyful Psalms. On festivals we read from the Torah, and on the major ones recite a Haftara, a section of the Bible from the Prophets. In addition, there is a special blessing called Shehecheyanu, thanking God "who has kept us alive and sustained us and enabled us to reach this (special) time." And the prayer Al HaNissim, thanking God for the miracles on Purim and Chanuka, should be just as relevant on this day.

There are daily penitential prayers called Tachanun or Nefilat Apayim that one does not say on festive occasions or other happy events. Amongst Chasidim there is a tradition not to say these on happy occasions, including the anniversary of the death of a great rabbi (as this is regarded as a happy event, the soul returning to its source). They drink a toast Lechayim, to life, physical and eternal. Most Chasidim have managed to find so many anniversaries that they have all but eliminated the prayer throughout the year. Now, on Yom Ha'atzmaut, should one say Tachanun or not?

Yom Ha'atzmaut also falls within the traditional Omer period of mourning in

the days from Pesach to Shavuot, when weddings and public celebrations with music are not allowed in memory of a series of historical tragedies. There are sufficient sources to support an exception to the rule: There's the obligation on an individual to rejoice and recite a blessing when a miraculous event happens to one, and there are precedents for the community to declare special days of rejoicing as well as fasting. Once a powerful religious authority could and would make decisions. Nowadays too many major rabbis are caught in a dated mind set. Hence, we are left with chaos.

Each religious sector of Orthodoxy celebrates the day differently liturgically. Some follow the whole special service once ordained by the Chief Rabbinate with Hallel prayers, Torah and Haftara, and Shehecheyanu. They treat it as the equivalent of Chanukah and Purim. Some only say Hallel. Some only say Shehecheyanu. Some say Tachanun; others don't.

There's a joke that someone asked the very secular first Prime Minister of Israel Ben Gurion what he said on Yom Ha'atzmaut. He replied that he said neither Tachanun, nor Shehecheyanu (nor anything else of a religious nature).

I think it is a shame that the Charedi world does not share in Yom Ha'atzmaut. I agree they were right to turn inwards and focus entirely on survival and rebuilding religious life after the depredations of the Second World War. And they have been remarkably successful in ensuring that we will survive religiously. In this, their great rabbis of the time compensated for those blinkered of their number who insisted on staying behind in Europe rather than escaping to Israel or the USA when they could.

But now they are wrong to extend this to refusing to recognize the miracle of Yom Ha'atzmaut or to allow young men are not perennial scholars to serve a country that has protected them, supported them, and enabled them to flourish. Now that their numbers have increased so much, their rigid opposition is a measure of the failure of their moral vision. Proof that just because a person is right on one issue that does not mean they are or will be always right on any other. Thank goodness more and more of their number are making up their own minds. It's a shame if the tail wags the dog. But if the head is paralyzed, at least the tail offers hope.

This confusion over Yom Ha'atzmaut illustrates our capacity for tunnel vision, pettiness and moral paralysis. Thank goodness there are still enough of us prepared to act on our own initiatives and recognize a miracle when we see one.