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Happy Yom HaAtzmaut!
I believe that the story of the return of the Jews to Israel in our time is not only one of the greatest ongoing miracles of the modern era, but indeed of all of Jewish and human history.

Greater in Three Ways

In some ways, the miracle of the Ingathering of the Exiles – קיבוץ גלויות – is greater than the greatest of miracles – יציאת מצרים – the Exodus from Egypt. It is true that the 10 Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea, and the Revelation at Sinai are unprecedented miracles in terms of transcending the laws of nature. Nothing compares. Nevertheless, the Ingathering of the Exiles transcends the laws of history in unparalleled, extraordinary fashion. Nothing compares.

Here’s why. The Ingathering of the Exiles in our times is greater than that of יציאת מצרים in three ways:
1. the length of exile
2. geographic dispersion
3. the vast cultural linguistic differences among the returnees.

Firstly, the Exodus came after 210 years whereas the return to modern Israel happened after almost 2,000 years of exile – almost 10 times longer.

Secondly, all of the Jewish people were in one country, Egypt, whereas in the modern era Jews came from well over 100 countries, having been scattered literally to all four corners of the Earth. And from the most distant places they have returned and continue to return. From Buenos Aires and Baghdad, Washington and Wellington, Manchester and Melbourne, Cape Town and Cochín, Moscow and Minneapolis, Toronto and Tehran, Aleppo and Addis Ababa and Fez and Far Rockaway.

Thirdly and profoundly, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Chayot, one of the great Galician rabbinic leaders in the early 19th century, points out a critical difference relating to the cultural linguistic milieu (Maharatz Chayot, Section 1, p. 74). In Egypt, the Children of Israel were confined both to a ghetto in Goshen and to a life of segregation and slavery. They could neither assimilate nor integrate into Egyptian society. They could speak Hebrew to each other and were culturally similar, distinct from the Egyptians.

On the other hand, in the Ingathering of the Exiles, the Jews spoke as many as 80 different languages! They were often unable to understand one another, and many had been assimilated or integrated into the cultural and ethnic environments of their host nations. As Rav Chayot suggests, it would require a separate remarkable miracle to unite so many culturally, linguistically disparate people into one functional society. Yet this is exactly what has happened in modern day Israel.

In truth, this drama is not just a modern saga but rather a chapter in a much bigger story, the plot of which was mapped out thousands of years ago.

Perhaps more than anything else, our Prophets identified the return from Exile to Eretz Yisrael – an almost inconceivable phenomenon – as the single most salient and significant sign of the era of Redemption in all of Biblical literature. The Ingathering of the Exiles appears in hundreds of prophecies and scores of prayers as a distinct indication of the future messianic era.

One such example is in the Book of Isaiah, in what would become the source of the heartfelt prayer about the Ingathering mentioned thrice daily in the Amidah, the silent prayer (Isaiah 11:11-12):

וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יוֹסִיף ה' שֵׁנִית יָדוֹ לִקְנוֹת אֶת שְׁאָר עַמּוֹ אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׁאֵר מֵאַשּׁוּר וּמִמִּצְרַיִם וּמִפַּתְרוֹס וּמֵכּוּשׁ וּמֵעֵילָם וְנָשָׂא נֵס לַגּוֹיִם וּמִשִּׁנְעָר וּמֵחֲמָת וּמֵאִיֵּי הַיָּם.
And it shall come to pass that on that day, the L-rd shall acquire the rest of His people, that will remain from Assyria and from Egypt and from Pathros and from Cush and from Elam and from Sumeria and from Hamat and from the islands of the sea.

And He shall raise a banner to the nations, and He shall gather the lost of Israel, and the scattered ones of Judah He shall gather from the four corners of the Earth.

Isaiah foretold that dispersed, forgotten and forlorn Jews all over the world would eventually return home. Already in Megillat Esther we read of the Jews scattered among the 127 countries of Achashverosh's sprawling empire. The Prophets knew these Jews would somehow defy seemingly immutable laws of history and somehow survive, return and thrive.

Indeed, the Prophet Jeremiah prophesied that the return of the exiles and the future Redemption will be greater than the Exodus from Egypt (Jeremiah 23:7-8):

וְלֹא יֹאמְרוּ עוֹד לָכֵן הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם ה' חַי ה' אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ אִם חַי ה' אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָה וַאֲשֶׁר כִּי מִצְרַיִם.

“Therefore, behold days are coming, says the L-rd, when they shall no longer say, ‘As the L-rd lives, Who brought up the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ but rather, ‘As the L-rd lives, Who brought up and Who brought the seed of the House of Israel from the northland and from all the lands where I have driven them, and they shall dwell on their Land.’

The Watershed Moment

What was the tipping point in time which opened the gates of a mass return of Jews to the land as foretold by the prophets? Without a doubt, the greatest watershed moment was the 5th of Iyar, May 14th, 1948, the day of the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel.

The establishment of the State resulted in the following astonishing reality. For the first time since the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. – and certainly since the fall of Beitar marking the end of the Bar Kochba rebellion – Jews could return to Eretz Yisrael with no restrictions imposed on them by a ruling power. Every regime that had ruled the Land, from the Romans through to the British Mandate, had limited Jewish immigration, barring Jews in one way or another from returning to the Land of their ancestors.

But all changed in May 1948. Since then, over the last 71 years, without even a day’s exception, the immigration gates have been open wide to Jews everywhere. And indeed they have returned. Not in their hundreds or even thousands, but in their millions... over 3 million from every corner of the globe!

In his book, “Israel,” Daniel Gordis relates the following regarding the extraordinary transformation in Israel's population immediately after the declaration of the State:

“Jews began to migrate to the newly created State in unprecedented numbers. Between independence on May 14th, 1948 and the end of 1951, no less than 686,739 Jews arrived in Israel. They hailed from 70 different countries and constituted, relative to the size of the population they were joining, the largest single migration of the 20th century. It was, by any measure, one of most extraordinary absorptions of immigrants in modern history” (p. 198).

Indeed, millions have returned and tens of thousands continue to return every year. Today, Israel amazingly has the largest Jewish community in the world, with almost half of all Jews living in the Holy Land. This is particularly striking when one compares the change in Israel’s population to that of Diaspora Jewry. Whereas Israel’s population has grown tenfold over the last 71 years, Diaspora Jewry has decreased from around 10.5 million to 7.7 million over the same period.

On this, the first anniversary of our HaMizrachi publication, we deeply appreciate the remarkable reality of Israel. With all of its many challenges, Israel is both a phenomenal fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and a dramatic leap forward in the epic story of Jewish and human history.

Rabbi Doron Perez is Chief Executive of World Mizrahi

Rabbi Doron Perez
Is Religious Zionism IDOL WORSHIP?

Wow, what a title! Though most of us would never imagine such an association, Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, the great sage and one of the Chafetz Chaim’s top students, made the equation. In his *Ikvita DiMashicha* (p. 36) Rav Elchanan condemned Secular Zionism as *Avoda Zara* (idol worship) and Religious Zionism as a mix of *Avodat Hashem* and *Avoda Zara*.

The Danger of *Avoda Zara*

What is the basis of his equation and how can we ensure that we live Religious Zionism as unadulterated *Avodat Hashem*? I believe that Rav Elchanan’s portrayal hinges on understanding the concept of *Avoda Zara*. The Torah never uses the term to describe idol worship; in fact, it uses the term to describe people who aimed to serve G-d. Nadav and Avihu, who offered fire on the day of the Mishkan’s inauguration (and were killed by heavenly fire in response), are described (in three places in the Torah) as bringing an *eish zara* (foreign fire). The Torah explains that although Nadav and Avihu aimed to serve G-d, the fire they offered was foreign because G-d had not commanded it to be offered. *Avodat Hashem* is not just about aiming to serve G-d, but about serving Him in the way He asks to be served. When we ‘serve’ how we feel we ought to, our service is *zara* and, to a large extent, self-focused.

In general, secular Zionist commitment to the Zionist cause is disconnected from *Avodat Hashem*.

The movement originated in the milieu of other European nationalist movements that motivated the founders, who saw themselves as parallel to these other visionaries. It is therefore understandable why Rav Elchanan equated their commitment to Zionism and their goal of building a Jewish State to *Avoda Zara*.

In a similar vein, it is possible for a religious Zionist to see his or her commitment to Zionism as separate from their religious identity. Such a scenario expresses itself in ‘cutting and pasting’ Secular Zionism into a religious worldview. The result is a hodge-podge identity, with a religion like that of religious Jews and a Zionism like that of secular Zionists. This is what Rav Elchanan condemned as a mix of *Avodat Hashem* and *Avoda Zara*.

Religious Zionism as Full *Avodat Hashem*

In actuality, Religious Zionism is meant to be a broad religious worldview that sees Zionism as emanating from what G-d expects from us, and our commitment to the State of Israel as part of our commitment to His Will. Just as He commands us to keep Shabbat, eat kosher, and observe laws of family purity, He similarly expects us to settle in and develop Eretz Yisrael.

In fact, the Eretz Yisrael component of *Avodat Hashem* is one of its central tenets. The first commandment to the first Jew was for him to move to Eretz Israel. The rest of the Torah is about the Jewish people’s exile from Eretz Yisrael and the struggle to return to it. The Torah’s blessings are promised to us as a people living in Eretz Yisrael, the ultimate punishment is exile from it, and *geula* (redemption) is our return to it. Settling and developing Eretz Yisrael is a *mitzvah* so important that Chazal equated its significance to that of the totality of all the other *mitzvot*.

Religious Zionism, when understood and lived correctly, is *Avodat Hashem* in the fullest sense of the word.

We should be thankful to live in a generation where we can live in and develop the Land of Israel and we should be proud to be people who appreciate this as part of our religious identity. At the same time, there are those who value Israel as an independent secular notion. It is critical that we remember that it is meant to be viewed as part of our religious identity. This recognition should express itself in our being as committed to Eretz Yisrael as we are to the rest of the *mitzvot* and as committed to the rest of the *mitzvot* as we are to Eretz Yisrael.

May we show our appreciation to G-d for returning Eretz Yisrael to us and our recognition of His role in doing so, by fully committing ourselves to all that He expects from us.

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Five months after the establishment of the State of Israel, we adopted the flag of Israel we know today. A blue Magen David on a white background, between two horizontal blue stripes symbolizing the stripes on a tallit and the blue dye, the כחול, of the tzitzit. We are commanded to look at these tzitzit “and remember all the commandments of the L-rd, and do them” (Bamidbar 15:39). Chazal explain that the כחול corresponds to the color of the Divine Revelation (Sifri, Bamidbar, 115) and deters us from sin.

The context of the mitzvah of tzitzit reveals added significance to the colors, and hence the Israeli flag. The mitzvah appears with other mitzvot connected to the Land of Israel, after the Sin of the Spies, who dissuaded the nation from entering the Land (Bamidbar 15:37-41). Ibn Ezra (ibid. 15:2) explains this juxtaposition as indicative of consolation and assurance for the people that they will indeed enter the Land. And the tzitzit in particular will remind them not to rebel against G-d.

How do the tzitzit remind us not to rebel? In addition to several expressions in the parasha of tzitzit that hint at the spies’ sin – e.g. “to explore (ללך) the land... “You shall not explore after (לא ת gratuites) your hearts”... “You shall see the Land” (13:18)... “You shall see it...” (15:39)... “You shall not explore after your hearts nor after your eyes”(15:39)... “We were in our eyes like grasshoppers, and so we were in their eyes” (13:33)... “Our brethren melted our hearts” (Devarim 1:28)... “after which you stray” (15:39)... “Your children will wander in the desert for 40 years and will bear [the consequences of] your straying” (14:33), we also find parallels in the garment itself.

The garment upon which the tzitzit are placed remind us of the garments torn by Calev and Yehoshua upon hearing Bnei Yisrael’s pleas to return to Egypt. The tzitzit remind us not to want to return to Egypt. We should stay focused on our national destiny of living in Eretz Yisrael!

That is why the term נקן (lit. corner), generally a word connoting geographical direction, is used (Bamidbar 15:38 and Devarim 22:12). It reminds us of the four directions the spies took in the Land of Israel. A thread of כחול among the white threads at each of these corners reminds us of the colors of the Land of Israel, particularly those of Nachalat Yehuda, in which Moshe had commanded the spies to tour (Bamidbar 13:17). These are the colors with which Yaakov blesses Yehuda and his land: “His eyes shall be ‘red’ with wine, and his teeth white with milk. (Bereishit 49:11-12).

The Ramban explains that the eyes will not be red, but rather colored blue (כחול) with the oxidized wine that grows in the mountains of Yehuda, as the teeth will be whitened by the milk of the flock in the deserts of Yehuda.

Blue and white are the colors of the borders of the Land promised to the Jewish people. They are also the colors of the topography of the Land as depicted in Shir HaShirim: The re’aya is waiting for her beloved in the hills of Yerushalayim (indigenous to the blue wine) while the dod hails from the desert of Ein Gedi, with his flock and milk – “My beloved is like a gazelle or a young hart; behold, he stands behind our wall, he looks in through the windows, he peers (metzitz) through the lattice” (Shir HaShirim 2:9), with the word metzitz obviously hinting at tzitzit.

The idea of blue and white being our national colors was voiced by Ludwig August von Frankl (1810–1894), an Austrian Jewish poet, in his poem, “Judah’s Colors”:

He puts on, when prayer fills him,
There colors of his country.
In a sparkling robe of white...
These are the colors of the beloved country:
Blue and white are Judah’s borders;
White is the priestly radiance,
And blue, the shining of the firmament.

The tzitzit and our flag remind us not to rebel nor lose sight of G-d’s commandments, particularly not to lose sight of the beauty of Eretz Yisrael. The tzitzit remind us of the majesty and love relationship with G-d in the Land of Israel and console us after years of wandering. And the Israeli flag waves in the Land of Yehuda as a constant reminder not only not to explore elsewhere – אל ת?): but that there is nowhere else to explore.

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Has Atchalta D’Geula Begun?

What are the essential steps in the redemptive process that will culminate in the building of the Beit HaMikdash? The Gemara in Sanhedrin (20b) cites the following Beraita: [The nation of] Israel was commanded to perform three mitzvot upon their entrance into the Land: to appoint a king upon themselves, and to eradicate the offspring of Amalek, and to build the Beit HaMikdash for themselves.

Accordingly, the sequence of the three mitzvot must be understood as follows. First, a Jewish government must be established in Eretz Yisrael, which then organizes a Jewish army. Then, that army must wage war against Amalek and eradicate it.

After completion of the first two introductory steps in the geula process, labeled atchalta d’geula, there is a mitzvah to build a Beit HaMikdash and offer korbanot, which is synonymous with geula itself.¹

The only way hakamat haMedina (establishment of the State) in 1948 would not be viewed as atchalta d’geula is if we would entertain the possibility that the current Medina will fail. If, G-d forbid, the Jewish people are forced to return the Land to the Arabs and the government is disbanded, a different hakamat haMedina would have to take place in the future, and the establishment of that government would be atchalta d’geula.

How do we know that this Medina will lead to the building of the Beit HaMikdash?

The Ramban writes that the two tochechat (admonitions) in the Torah correspond to the two churbanot (destructions); the tochecha in Bechukotai represents the churban that led to galut Bavel, while the tochecha in Ki Tavo represents the churban that caused our present galut.

The navi has assured us: יָם נַטִּיתָם אַדְמָתָם אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָהֶם "and they will never again be uprooted from their land that I have given them" (Amos 9:15). This does not only mean that there will never be a third churban Beit HaMikdash. The second, and final, tochecha only speaks of a churban haMedina, and never even mentions a churban Beit HaMikdash. Rather, the promise of the navi is that there will never be a third churban haMedina, G-d forbid.

Certainly, in the period immediately following hakamat haMedina in 1948, it was unclear whether that event was an atchalta d’geula. If the establishment of the Medina would have been undone at that early stage, it would have been viewed historically in the same way as the Bar Kochba revolt. Bar Kochba minted coins and declared himself king around 60 years after churban Bayit Sheini, only to have his “government” collapse soon after. However, that event cannot be viewed as a third churban haMedina, because his “attempted government” is regarded historically merely as “the Bar Kochba rebellion” against Roman authority, not as a bona fide government. The promise of the navi is that there will never be a third churban haMedina, G-d forbid.

The above-mentioned assurance of the navi, that there will not be a third churban, would apply to the current Medinat Yisrael once it is labeled to be “bevinyana,” in a “built” state. This classification has already been defined in Halachah with regard to the obligation to tear keri’ah upon witnessing cities of Yehudah in a state of churban. The Magen Avraham (Orach Chaim 561:1) rules that one tears keri’ah even if the city is inhabited by Jews, as long as it is ruled by non-Jews. If that is the definition of “churban” of cities of Yehudah, it follows that “binyan” is defined as being under the jurisdiction of a Jewish government. If Eretz Yisrael is currently in a state of “binyan” and will never again experience churban, hakamat haMedina can rightfully be termed atchalta d’geula.

(This essay can be seen in expanded form in Rav Schachter on the Moadim.)

¹ B’Ilave HaTzon, p. 211-214.

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EARLY YOM HAATZMAUT

This year the 5th of Iyar falls out on Friday, as was the case when the State was established. However, since celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut on a Friday is liable to cause a mass desecration of Shabbat, it was decided in the early years of the State that if Yom HaAtzmaut falls on Friday or Saturday, it will be moved to Thursday (3rd or 4th of Iyar). This, in addition to other adjustments to the Yom HaAtzmaut celebrations, has created a strange situation in which Yom HaAtzmaut is celebrated on the 5th of Iyar only if it is a Wednesday!

What is the validity of celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut early? Can Hallel be said on this day? Does the 5th of Iyar (Friday) have a festive character? Do we say Tachanun? When is shaving permitted – on Thursday or Friday?

Purim that falls on Shabbat

A similar reality, in which the Sages’ initiated changes due to the fear of desecrating Shabbat, is when Purim falls on Shabbat. The Gemara (Megillah 4b) says that in this case the Megillah is not read on Shabbat, but on Friday.

Rava explains that when it comes to the mitzvot of meggillah, shofar and lulav, there was a danger that a person would learn their laws on Shabbat, and that he might violate the prohibitions on carrying the objects and traversing four cubits in the public domain. Rabbi Yosef has a unique explanation why we read the meggillah early: poor people wait for the reading of the meggillah, for that is when matanot laEvyonim are given, and if meggillah is read on Shabbat, the poor would suffer.

Is there special significance to the actual day of the fifth of Iyar?

Regarding Purim that falls on Shabbat, the Gemara says that during that Shabbat, “we question and learn about the matter of the day.” It is possible to understand that the Gemara’s intention is that Purim remains on Shabbat, and only the reading of the meggillah is moved forward to Friday.

The Shulchan Aruch states that most of the day continues to be on Shabbat. The Mishnah Berura explains that only the reading of the meggillah is on Friday, while “Al HaNissim” is recited on Shabbat.

Following this, ostensibly all things that do not violate Shabbat should be observed on the 5th of Iyar, and only the ceremonies should be held on the earlier date.

Yom HaAtzmaut – in keeping with Shabbat observance

Nevertheless, it turns out that this is not so. With regards to Purim, it emerges from the Gemara that at first they would celebrate Purim on Shabbat itself, and only later, it was decided that the time of Purim should be changed because of Shabbat desecration. In our case though, Yom HaAtzmaut was never celebrated on Shabbat, and therefore it is easier to move.

Moreover, Yom HaAtzmaut was determined by the end of the British rule in Palestine. This was supposed to occur on Shabbat, but to prevent desecration of Shabbat, the declaration of the State was advanced by a few hours, to Friday afternoon.

Similarly, Yom HaAtzmaut is still moved forward because of the fear of desecrating Shabbat. What a great Kiddush Hashem! What other country moves its Independence Day because of religious concerns? Only in the State of Israel will Yom HaAtzmaut change to accommodate Shabbat.

This is true independence. Yom HaAtzmaut set by the Kingdom of Israel, Yom HaAtzmaut determined by keeping Shabbat.

In practice

Each year Yom HaAtzmaut is celebrated on the day determined by the law to prevent desecration of Shabbat, and that is the main date for all celebrations that year. Therefore, this is the day on which Hallel should be said. Hallel is not only said about the very act of rescue, but about the return of the kingdom to Israel. This miracle continues anew each day. Every day our enemies call for our destruction and every day we continue to feel the miracle of the existence of the State of Israel. However, on the 5th of Iyar, one does not say Tachanun, because on that day the miracle of the declaration of the State took place.

We thank G-d for all the wonderful things He has given us, and we pray that He will continue to merit us with our country being built, evolving, and shining in a light of holiness and purity.

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“Express thanks to G-d, for He is good; His steadfast love is eternal!” Thus let the redeemed of the L-rd say, those He redeemed from adversity, whom He gathered in from the lands, from east and west, from the north and from the sea... they cried to the L-rd, and He rescued them from their troubles. He showed them a direct way to reach a settled place. Let them praise the L-rd for His steadfast love, His wondrous deeds for mankind; for He has satisfied the thirsty, filled the hungry with all good things” (Psalms 107: 1-9).

This psalm expresses one’s gratitude for G-d’s kindness toward him and his rescue from his distress, and Chazal learned from here who is obligated to offer a korban toda – a sacrifice of thanks to G-d. This psalm is read on Yom HaAtzmaut as an expression of immense gratitude to G-d for His gathering us from our exile, bringing us back to Eretz Yisrael and allowing us to live in an independent Jewish State. The miracle of redemption taking place before our eyes over the last 150 years is astonishing, and it is certainly fitting to say “Praise the L-rd for His wondrous deeds for mankind.” There was no other nation in the world who were exiled from their land, dispersed amongst many countries, remained united in their faith and nationality, and finally returned to their land and re-established an independent State. The process of the nation of Israel returning to our Land is a miracle and a wonder, and we must recognize the greatness of the time and be thankful for the honor of living in a generation that experienced the redemption.

This is a process that is not entirely surprising to the Jewish people; we have waited for it to happen throughout many years of exile. The books of the Prophets are filled with prophecies about the future redemption and the end of days. The people of Israel held faith and hope for this redemption during 2,000 years of difficult and bitter exile. The prophecies of redemption and the requests for redemption embedded in our daily prayers were what enabled the Jewish people to continue to hold on to their faith during the difficult years, and which ultimately enabled the process of redemption to take place.

Geula (redemption) is described in Tanach from several angles and with several possibilities. Let us look at the first prophecy on the topic of redemption that appears in the Torah:

“When all these things happen to you – the blessing and the curse that I have set before you – and you take them to heart amidst the various nations to which the L-rd your G-d has banished you, and you return to the L-rd your G-d, and you and your children heed His command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, then the L-rd your G-d will restore your fortunes and take you back in love. He will bring you together again from all the people among whom the L-rd your G-d has scattered you” (Deuteronomy 30: 1-3).

This is one of the most exciting passages in the Torah. G-d promises the people of Israel that after all the harsh curses that will fall upon them in exile (as described in the previous chapters – predictions of the numerous troubles that indeed afflicted the people of Israel during the exile), the redemption is guaranteed. However, not only is the return of the people of Israel to its Land guaranteed here, but also the return to their G-d. It seems that this special passage does not only describe a unilateral move by Israel to repent – as a result of which they receive reward in the form of a return to the Land – but rather a process of mutual return. This passage describes the process of repentance and the process of redemption as intertwined, because they are one process of the mutual return of Israel to G-d and of G-d to Israel. The renewal of the mutual connection between the people of Israel and their G-d is the highest aspiration, and it is the complete redemption to which we still aspire. When this connection between the people of Israel and their G-d is at its zenith, the people of Israel can dwell in the Land of Israel, live safely, and be blessed with blessings in all spheres of life.

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When thinking about Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terror) one can be filled with sadness at the seeming futility of remembrance. The clichés of fallen soldiers living on through our memorials can seem so empty. What is human memory after all? Nothing but images, recollections and thoughts – intangible, ethereal and even more fleeting than our physical lives on this earth. Mere mortals, we are here today and gone tomorrow, with no trace left of our physical existence, and certainly no trace left of the intangible memories embedded deep in our fragile brain tissue.

“There is no forgetfulness before Your throne of glory.” These words of our Sages are the secret to understanding the concept of memory. Human memory is indeed fleeting and is as temporary as the human body, which comes from dust and returns to dust. But G-d is eternal and He gave the gift of immortality to the soul. He also gave the gift of eternity to our deeds in this world. Every mitzvah a person does in this world has eternal merit before G-d, who gathers and records every action of every human being. The soul and its legacy of deeds in this world are forever.

As the people and the State of Israel gather on Yom HaZikaron and Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora join in solidarity with memorial services on all continents, we all do so in the comfort of knowing that the legacy of our fallen heroes is not dependent on the fleeting fragility of our mortal memories and our temporary earthly lives. True remembrance only resides with G-d. The souls of the fallen soldiers stand before G-d forever with eternal merit – the merit of defending the State and the people of Israel and Jews around the world; the merit of their bravery and absolute selflessness in sacrificing life itself so that their fellow Jews can live in safety and security. These holy souls and their holy actions are never forgotten by G-d and their merit is eternal, more eternal than anything we know of in this physical world.

The memory and eternal merit of the righteous heroes of the past are not in our hands. They don’t need us for that. And indeed, we couldn’t even begin to do that for them. How can we temporal beings bestow eternity on others? Yizkor, the great remembrance prayer of Jewish tradition, says Yizkor Elokim – may G-d remember, not us – because only He can; it is only with the Eternal One, Who was, is and always will be, that any concept of eternity exists.

Remembering our fallen soldiers is not about granting them immortality – only G-d can do that – but it is to sensitize us to acknowledge their sacrifices on our behalf with humble gratitude, and to ensure that the bereaved families are properly respected and cared for. It is not about our fleeting memories of the past, but about the moral imperative of how we live in the present.

As we remember the heroes of the past, we learn what true immortality is about. As the verses from Psalms recited before Yizkor say: “But what is man that You notice him? Man is like a fleeting breath. His days are like a passing shadow. In the morning he blossoms and is rejuvenated and by evening is cut down and brittle.”

And yet there is a very deep psychological need for immortality. The Tree of Life was the tempting counterpart to the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. People are constantly seeking ways to grasp some fragment of immortality. Our physical bodies are indeed fleeting; however, through our souls G-d has placed immortality at the heart of our beings. As the Yizkor verses go on to express, “The dust returns to the earth as it was, but the spirit returns to G-d Who gave it.” How pathetic and empty is any attempt to find immortality in the dust of the physical world. No building, monument, or physical memorial of this world can ever give a person the gift of immortality. The only eternal monuments of our lives are the good deeds we take with us when our immortal souls return to G-d after leaving the physical world, thereby fulfilling the final of the Yizkor verses, “I, in righteousness, will see Your face, and be blessed with a vision of You when I awake.”

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Historically, the family has been considered the basic unit of society. Certainly in Judaism, the strength of the mishpacha (family) is said to be a major factor in Jewish survival. In the general population, the family has suffered serious casualties. One out of three children in the US lives in a single parent home. The statistics in the Jewish population are not as grim, but whereas divorce used to be a rarity, it is now commonplace, and the fragility of the family unit certainly has an effect on the children.

Many relationships begin with two people falling in love. While this seems to be perfectly logical, listen to what George Bernard Shaw said: “When two people are under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most illusive, and most transient of passions, they are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.” Even if they do not take a formal oath to that effect, they probably believe that their passion will be eternal.

Of course, love is essential to a marriage, but see what the Torah says about Yitzchak’s marriage to Rivka, “He married Rivka, she became his wife, and he loved her” (Genesis 24:67). Look carefully at the sequence of the words. Yitzchak’s love for Rivka developed after the marriage rather than before it.

Avraham’s servant, Eliezer, who was sent to find a wife for Yitzchak, watched for a young woman who championed chesed (acts of kindness). “Let it be the maiden to whom I shall say, ‘Please tip over your jug so I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will even water your camels,’ You will have designated her for Yitzchak.” The basis for the relationship was a commonality of values, not “the most violent, most insane, most illusive, and most transient of passions.” This was a relationship in which true love could develop.

The Talmud says that the relationship of a husband to his wife should be “to love her as much as he loves himself, and to respect her even more than he respects himself.” (Yevamot 62b). It is of interest that the Rambam, in citing the Talmud, reverses the order and places respect before love. Why? Because it is unrealistic to expect that one can have so intense a love from day one. It takes time for true love to develop. However, respect is something that can begin on day one.

Of course there is passion in a marriage, but Shaw was right. A marriage based on passion is on fragile foundations. The mutual love and respect for one another that develops after the marriage is the cement that can bond the couple throughout their entire lives.

It is of course essential that each partner should behave in a manner conducive to the development of love and respect. The formula for this is simple, albeit not easy. It is the Rambam’s version of the Talmud, “to respect her even more than he respects himself, and to love her as much as he loves himself.” He continues that the wife’s attitude toward the husband should be similar, to honor him and fulfill his wishes. Having first established that the husband must respect his wife, it is obvious that his wishes will not encroach on his consideration of and respect for her.

The Jewish family is now at greater risk than ever before. These Torah teachings about marriage can be our salvation.

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Does adolescence require a change in our attitudes to our children?

Rabbi Elimelech Bar-Shaul, in his book “Reiyach Mayim,” offers us a true gem of educational advice: “And Yaakov sacrificed a sacrifice on the mountain, and called to his brothers to eat bread” (Genesis 31:54). The Midrash interprets: “And to his brothers... and weren’t they his sons? But when they reached Shechem, Yaakov imagined them and called them brothers.” Rabbi Bar-Shaul explains that parents – and especially the most devoted parents – expect respect from their children. Indeed, this is the mitzvah of the Torah: “Honor your father and your mother,” “Man should fear his mother and father.”

That said, parents also have a duty to respect their children, and particularly once they are older. This is part of the educational mitzvah incumbent upon the parents. Parents should remember that grown-up children demand recognition as adults, and do not want to continue to be seen as children. If they are not recognized as adults, or even ignored, they tend to prove their maturity by rebellion through speech or action, and all that entails. Parents must immediately recognize and adapt to their children’s new state of physical and spiritual maturity, and demonstrate this recognition in practice. Only then will parents be able to be good educators and listen to their grown-up children, who will in turn have the trust and respect to listen to such parents. As Rabbi Bar-Shaul says, “Blessed are the parents who make this effort to the best of their abilities, and children who have such parents are happy.”

This is what the Midrash means: when the sons of Yaakov “came to Shechem” – that is, they physically or mentally grew – Yaakov likened them to himself. He looked at their full height (spiritual or physical) and recognized their maturity, treating them as “brothers,” as adults.

And how old were the sons of Yaakov at the time? Some were just 13! (Shimon, for example).

Rabbi Bar-Shaul emphasizes that recognizing the child’s maturity does not mean the end of their education. On the contrary. The task should continue, but there has to be a significant shift in both content and style. This turning point is a condition for educational success. Those who are unaware of the changes that have occurred in their adult children – or simply ignore them – and continue to treat them as grade schoolers by perpetuating the educational path they adopted in earlier years, will not succeed. Their children are likely to rebel and any educational efforts are likely to backfire. Hence the first stage is for parents to recognize adolescent maturity. The second stage is to interact with them as adults.

The Netziv writes that Yaakov likened his sons “brothers” for educational reasons. He asked them to gather stones to create a monument symbolizing peace between him and Lavan in order to educate them about peace among humanity. He wanted them to learn about this important idea, so he ordered them to gather stones. If he had said, ‘My sons, gather stones,’ they would not have internalized the message, but rather they would have told themselves that they were acting on their father’s command. So Yaakov called them “brothers” so that they would understand that even without a father’s decree, it would be appropriate for them to strive for peace and settle with those who make them feel secure.

Recognizing the maturity of our children does not diminish our educational responsibility. Rather, it demands a different educational approach that does not rely on the “decrees of the father” (discipline and obedience), but on skills of persuasion, dialogue and the personification of values. Small children want to obey, adults want to identify. A grown-up child should not be left to his or her own devices nor neglected, but should be treated in a manner appropriate to an adult. In the past, a laconic parental imperative (even without accompanying explanations and rationalizations) caused the child to act and obey, but now it is no longer enough. Communication must change. While the parent-child relationship must obviously be upheld and respected, there is also a need for a healthy brotherly or sisterly-like relationship to develop.

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The Next Challenge

The first task of Zionism was achieved with extraordinary success: the creation of a Jewish state. The second task has not yet been fully achieved: the creation of a Jewish society built entirely around Jewish values. Yet historically it was the second, not the first, that drove the vision of the Bible. Israel in ancient times was not conceived as a political project alone. Judaism never saw power as an end in itself. Politically, one of the most successful Israelite kings was Jeroboam II. Yet we do not see him as one of our heroes.

The visionaries who sustained our national identity saw the Jewish task as the creation of a society built on justice, compassion, the sanctity of life and the dignity of the individual, a society that was the opposite of the empires of their day, in which few had power and the many were powerless.

As historian Norman Gottwald wrote about the Israelites of Bible times, 'Israel thought it was different because it was different: it constituted an egalitarian social system in the midst of stratified societies.' G.K. Chesterton once said that America was the only nation built on an idea. He was wrong. Biblical Israel was based on an idea, millennia ahead of its time: that every individual is in the image of G-d, and society must honor that fact.

That was the role of the prophets. While others were reacting to the present, they spoke about the future. Their message was simple: serve G-d. But it had a deep rationality that can be translated into secular terms. The prophets were political realists. They knew that Israel is a tiny country surrounded by large empires. It cannot match them on any conventional measure of military-demographic strength. Israel wins its battles because of its extraordinary morale, itself the result of its societal strength. When divisions open up within society, people become demoralized and the nation falls prey to its larger, more powerful neighbors. In Israel, social solidarity is the nation’s best long term defense.

I had a life-changing experience when writing the first of my political books. I suddenly realized that Tanach contains a political theory more subtle than any of the philosophical classics. Uniquely, Israel had not one foundational moment but two.

One is the moment when Israel first became a kingdom in the days of Samuel. Until then it had been a loose confederation of tribes, without a political head of state. It was led, during emergencies, by charismatic figures known as ‘judges.’ In Samuel’s old age the people demanded a king. G-d tells Samuel to warn the people of the risks involved, and adds that if, despite the warning, they still want to go ahead, Samuel should appoint a king.

The narrative is fraught with ambivalence. Samuel warns the people what will happen if they appoint a king. He will take their sons into the army, their daughters into royal service, seize their property and tax their produce. When that happens, he says, ‘You will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen,
and G-d will not answer you.’ Is the Bible telling us that monarchy is good or bad? Maimonides said ‘good;’ Abarbanel, who worked with monarchs in Spain, said ‘bad.’

It was the 19th century Talmudist, Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes, who solved the problem. What G-d and Samuel were proposing was a social contract, on the lines later expounded by the founders of modern political thought: Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. A group of self-interested individuals will find it worthwhile to appoint a leader who will defend them from lawlessness within and enemies outside. To do so they will have to sacrifice some of their liberty and wealth, but the alternative is anarchy and foreign conquest. Samuel’s appointment of Saul is the first recorded instance of a social contract.

What makes the history of Israel unique is that this was its second political founding, not its first. That had happened centuries earlier at Mount Sinai, when the people made a covenant with G-d. They were no longer a group of escaping ex-slaves. At Sinai they became a body politic under the sovereignty of G-d with the Torah as their written constitution. In the days of Samuel they became a kingdom, but it was in the days of Moses that they became a nation.

Tanach makes a clear distinction between social contract and social covenant. Social contract creates a state; social covenant creates a society. Social contract is based on self-interest; social covenant is about shared identity. Social contract belongs to the world of politics; social covenant is about morality and collective responsibility, the idea that ‘all Jews are responsible for one another.’ Only one other nation has ever had a similar dual founding, namely the United States, whose covenant is set out in the Declaration of Independence (1776), and whose contract was formulated in the Constitution (1787). This is no coincidence: the Founding Fathers of America were deeply influenced by the Hebrew Bible.

Israel’s dual structure enabled it to do what no other nation in history has ever done: survive as a nation for 2,000 years without a state. After the Roman conquest, Israel was no longer a kingdom. Its social contract was inoperable. But it still had the covenant. Therefore it still remained a nation even in exile. In Judaism, covenant is stronger than contract.

That is what makes ancient Jewish history so relevant today. Israel is a highly successful state. But there are fault lines within society, between religious and secular, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and many others. At times, fissures become open wounds. For anyone who remembers what happened in the wake of national divisions in the First and Second Temple periods, warning signals should be sounding loud and clear.

Prophets speak from within the society they challenge. They are not armchair critics, speaking from afar. Israel is a nation of heroes capable of meeting any challenge. But heroes need a diet of ideals not supplied by the market economy or liberal democracy alone. That is why politics and economics are not enough to sustain a society. There must be a richly textured sense of the common good. That needs not social contract but social covenant.

The values for which the prophets fought could not be more relevant to the politics of today. Israel, ancient and modern, represents the search for freedom, justice and compassion against the perennial temptations of tyranny, resentment, cruelty and death. The dark forces have not disappeared. When it comes to the defense of freedom and the sanctity of life, Israel is still on the front line.

Israel’s enemies have come to the following judgment, based on an insight of the great 14th century Arab intellectual, Ibn Khaldun: affluent, city-based civilizations eventually become decadent and effete. They become hedonist and individualist. They lose the will for the struggle and the sacrifices it entails. Eventually they fall to the desert dwellers, who have no need for luxury and no fear of death.

Israel’s enemies underestimate its strength. It remains a nation of indomitable courage, whose moral energy and prophetic ideals remain a source of inspiration to the world, whose story of remarkable achievement speaks not just to Jews, but to all who believe in the power of the human spirit as it reaches out to G-d, as an everlasting symbol of the victory of life over death, hope of despair. Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, Israel made a barren land bloom, an ancient language speak, and the West’s oldest faith young again. The time has come for a renewal of Israel’s covenant with history and hope.

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To celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, Mizrachi is sending inspiring Israeli speakers and thinkers to 360 communities all around the globe. The name – Israel360 – reflects Israel’s international reach and Mizrachi’s mission of spreading Torat Yisrael across the world.

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THE SWEETNESS OF THE PRIESTLY BLESSING
IN ERETZ YISRAEL

One of the main distinctions between tefillah in Eretz Yisrael and tefillah in the Diaspora is Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessings. In Ashkenazi communities in the Diaspora, Birkat Kohanim only occurs during Mussaf on holidays, while in Eretz Yisrael it is performed on a daily basis.

If we explore the sources, it would seem that the mitzvah of Birkat Kohanim should be performed on a frequent basis.

We find three different approaches to explain why Ashkenazi communities in the Diaspora do not say Birkat Kohanim on a daily basis.

The Beit Yosef suggests that the kohanim used to immerse in a mikveh before Birkat Kohanim. The mikvaot were often very cold and it was too difficult to immerse on a daily basis. Therefore, the custom developed to only say Birkat Kohanim on the holidays, when the kohanim would immerse in the mikveh as special preparation for the chag.

The Beit Ephraim offers a second approach: kohanim nowadays do not have an established lineage and so we cannot be sure who is a real kohen. Since there are problems with a non-kohen saying Birkat Kohanim, it is best if nobody does so. However, if we were to abandon the mitzvah entirely, the priestly legacy would not be passed on as effectively from generation to generation. Therefore, the practice developed to only include Birkat Kohanim on the holidays.

The third and most cited approach is presented by Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the Rama: “It is common practice in these areas to only say Birkat Kohanim on the holidays because it is then that the kohanim are absorbed with the joy of the holiday, and someone who is satisfied and happy is worthy of reciting a blessing. However, this is not true on other days of the year, even on Shabbat, when everyone is worried about their stability and livelihood. Even on the holiday itself we only conduct Birkat Kohanim during Mussaf because that is when everyone is about to leave synagogue and enjoy the holiday.”

According to the Rama, preoccupation with one’s daily needs and survival in the Diaspora preclude the kohanim from being in the proper, joyful state of mind to perform Birkat Kohanim.

Why is simcha such an important factor in Birkat Kohanim?

The Gemara (Shabbat 30b) states: “The Divine Presence does not descend... unless one is in a state of happiness.” If the goal of Birkat Kohanim is to cause the Divine Presence to rest among us, it makes sense that we would require kohanim to be in a state of simcha.

If a concern about livelihood, security and welfare is the litmus test for the performance of Birkat Kohanim on a daily basis, it would seem ironic that those who live in the Diaspora have more such concerns than those living in Israel.

Rabbi Aryeh Tzvi Fromer, in explaining the Rama’s position, suggests that even in insecure times in Eretz Yisrael, there is a sense of permanence that provides residents with the peace of mind and resolve to face the ever-present challenges.

Further, Rav Kook writes that in Eretz Yisrael there is a certain sense of expansive simcha that does not exist in the Diaspora; a sense of shleimut, wholeness, that makes living here feel more permanent and anchored than living in the Diaspora.

Nevertheless, one can achieve a permanent joyous state of mind in Eretz Yisrael. It always amazes me to observe the tension and anxiety that encompasses olim before they board an aliyah flight and how it suddenly transforms into excitement, happiness and contentment. I think that as they step off the plane they immediately transcend to a new reality and are engulfed by the permanence of Eretz Yisrael.

We are truly living in miraculous times, in which we have the historic opportunity to return to our homeland, fulfill national destiny and experience the serenity and joy that can only be actualized in Eretz Yisrael.

1 Orach Chaim, 128.
2 Orach Chaim, 6.
3 Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 128:44.
4 Eretz Tzvi, 1:30.
6 Sermons, Naso, Sidra 2 (appendix to 5773).

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SURGERY AND JAZZ: EMBRACING MISTAKES

Dr. Charles Bosk, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, analyzed the difference between the most outstanding neurosurgeons who, after years of extensive training and practice, had the best success rates and lost the fewest patients, and those at the other end of the spectrum, who lost so many patients that their privileges at their hospitals were terminated.

The top surgeons weren’t those with the best manual dexterity, the highest MCAT scores, or graduates of the best training programs. Rather, the best predictor of being in the top tier of this select group of doctors was how they handled their mistakes. If they lost a patient, these top neurosurgeons wouldn’t rest until they determined how they could do the surgery better in the future. They would go to the medical library to see if they missed a recent study and they would call leading surgeons around the world to discuss what approach might work better the next time. In contrast, the transcripts of the interviews with the worst performing surgeons were chilling. They would blame the lighting in the operating room or the incompetent nurses assisting them with the surgery. These doctors externalized all blame and failed to learn from their mistakes. Stanford University professor, Robert Sutton, quotes similar studies that document how creating an atmosphere marked by emotional safety and the ability to calmly view mistakes as an opportunity to grow and improve is a central ingredient in effective teaching and leading.

When sociologist Dr. Sam Oliner was 12 years old, the Nazis came into his town in Poland and murdered his family, neighbors and friends. During the chaos, he escaped to a farmhouse on the outskirts of town and was taken in by a Polish gentile family who sheltered him at tremendous risk to their own lives. As an adult, Oliner dedicated his career to researching what the active ingredients were in the childhoods of these moral giants which resulted in such remarkable courage and ethical clarity. Oliner found that a crucial contributor was how their parents handled their children’s mistakes. When they did something that violated the moral code of the family, rather than berating them, their parents patiently explained what was wrong with their behavior. They conveyed a clear belief in their child’s ability to engage in a teshuva (repentance) process that would repair the mistake by making appropriate apologies and righting the wrong done to the injured party.

In contrast to the prevailing atmosphere our children are exposed to in the media and through many of our leaders, we should act differently. Adults should try to teach children to have broad enough shoulders to accept responsibility for wrongdoing. And calmly suggest corrective action while simultaneously communicating a belief in the children’s ability to grow from their mistakes.

In 1975, world renowned jazz pianist, Keith Jarrett, arrived early to try out the piano he would be using for his sold-out concert that evening. He immediately discovered that the piano was not usable. The black keys stuck, the pedals didn’t work, and the upper register of the keyboard produced sound that was harsh and thin because all the felt had worn away. The 17-year-old girl in charge of producing the concert desperately tried to obtain an appropriate replacement but was not successful on such short notice. When Jarrett told her that he would have to cancel the concert, she became extremely upset at the prospect of being publicly humiliated. Jarrett took pity on her and agreed to perform. The performance that evening, on this ostensibly unusable piano, became the best-selling piano recording and the best-selling jazz piano solo in music history. If you listen to the recording, you instantly recognize how the seemingly insurmountable challenge became the source of genius. The adjustments that Jarrett had to make to cope with this broken piano made the music better. Forced to avoid the harsh registers, Jarrett stuck to the middle of the keyboard. This passion and effort brought out a level of sublime artistry that over 40 years later hasn’t been surpassed.

The Talmud tells us: “A person does not understand statements of Torah unless he stumbles in them” (Gittin, 43a). The lesson of the jazz concert is that parents and teachers need to educate children not to be afraid of failing, to appreciate the power of risk, and to view mistakes as a crucial engine of growth.

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When you hear about a terror attack, you read the horrifying details and the heartbreaking stories of the families left behind, your heart goes out to their children, their parents, their spouses and their brothers and sisters. But you can never fully fathom the devastation it causes to families who lose loved ones or are injured in attacks. Their lives are plunged into chaos and despair.

This is where the Jerusalem-based OneFamily steps in.

It began almost 18 years ago, says Chantal Belzberg, CEO of OneFamily. “We were about to celebrate our daughter Michal’s Bat Mitzvah when there was a suicide bomb attack at the Sbarro Pizza Restaurant. 15 people were murdered and 85 injured. There and then, Michal decided to cancel her celebrations and asked family and guests to donate to the wounded.”

As the wave of suicide bomb attacks continued to ravage the country, Belzberg (and her husband Marc), realized there was an immense need to care for the victims of terror, and to provide them with emotional and financial support.

“We strive to rehabilitate, reintegrate and rebuild the lives of thousands of Israelis affected by terror, by providing them with a comprehensive blend of financial assistance, therapeutic programs, workshops and retreats as well as legal aid, regardless of race or religion. Over the last 18 years we have provided more than $55 million in assistance to more than 4,000 victims of terrorism and war, and their families.”

Before Israel’s 71st Independence Day celebrations this year, the nation will mark Remembrance Day for Israel’s fallen. While the entire country comes to a standstill and honors them once a year, OneFamily remembers these people all year round.

On Tuesday night, May 7 at 8pm, more than 500 victims of terror, counsellors and friends will gather in the garden of the OneFamily Center in Jerusalem to mark the solemn event, as one big family. The annual occasion provides a platform for victims to share their personal stories of loss.

No More Hugs

Last year for example, Iris Yifrach spoke about her son, Eyal, who was murdered five years ago: “For four years you have been gone and the memories burn inside my heart. When you entered the house, it was like the sun coming out... remember how your little sisters used to hang on to your big backpack? And I was in the corner of the kitchen waiting patiently for my turn. Waiting for your warmth, your greatness. In the great light you brought with you, you would say ‘Mommy I’m home, how are you?’ And in the precious moments during candle lighting on Shabbat, you would come out of your room dressed in white, and I was already imagining your father and I walking down the aisle on the happiest day of your life...”

Or Tzion Netanel, wife of Cpt. Yonatan Netanel, who spoke of life without her husband: “We were already three – father, mother, and Ma’ayan. Yoni went to war and promised we would celebrate our wedding anniversary together and travel far away. Yoni traveled far away. Too far. Without me. With one hand I held onto Ma’ayan. A soft baby with beautiful eyes like her father’s. And with my other hand, I hugged those who came to comfort me. What comfort? I wanted Yoni himself to come and hug me...”

And Noa Bukris, who so misses her sister Hadar: “Sunday November 22, 2015. I had an alert on my cellphone telling me there was a stabbing at the Gush Etzion junction. I was angry. I said to myself, enough! I don’t have the strength to hear about these attacks every day and so I put the phone away. But this time it wasn’t just an alert. It was my sister. Hadar was dead. I felt like my heart had exploded. Without a hospital, without a final word. Without one last hug...”

Now, OneFamily provides those hugs.
Two Orphans Marry

When both parents have been murdered, OneFamily steps in, filling the void, providing hands on support through all stages of the orphans’ lives. The organization helps with studies, jobs and personal issues.

At a recent Orphans Division retreat, members were able to enjoy a pain-free environment, and talk freely about their fears and daily challenges. The relaxed atmosphere allows them to strengthen personal ties between siblings and others, unwind, receive hugs and moral support. It helps them to become more resilient.

And that’s not all.

Even amongst the pain, the loss and the sadness, we share the good times too. For example, the upcoming wedding of Avigdor Gavish and Ayelet Dikstein, who met at OneFamily. Both lost their parents and a sibling in terror attacks 17 years ago. Since then, OneFamily has become their second home.

The two have managed to rehabilitate and rebuild their lives. Avigdor has degrees in industrial engineering and music. He recently released an album called “New Day,” in which he composed the music, wrote the lyrics and performed the vocals. Ayelet is a practicing dance and movement therapist.

Dealing with PTSD

A person is driving home, enjoying a walk, going shopping, on the way to work or just sitting at home, and suddenly – without any warning or preparation – their world is turned upside-down. They experience helplessness, problems in interpersonal relationships, inability to function, difficulty in sleeping and extreme mental and physical anguish. The situation impacts the entire family, extended family and friends.

“We saw the need and created a unique program for PTSD,” says Belzberg. The program is designed to help sufferers and their spouses develop skills to cope with their trauma, improve their relationships with each other and their children and provide them with the ability to function in life. Couples who participated in a recent workshop said it contributed greatly to the quality of their daily lives and marital functioning and boosted their self-confidence and esteem.

And Still More...

OneFamily also runs a Young Adult Division. During the latest three-day retreat in the north of Israel, 40 men and women expressed how necessary these breaks are: “It’s the only place I can express myself freely without being judged,” one of the participants wrote.

Another member of the group wrote, “I don’t know where I would be today without OneFamily. I don’t know if I would even still be alive. OneFamily picked me up, lifted me when I fell, when I was afraid or lost control, and strengthened my self-confidence.”

The organization also spearheaded a campaign helping 500 needy terror victims celebrating Pesach. These people are unable to hold down jobs because of their physical injuries and mental trauma. Some are faced with the dire dilemma of choosing how to use what little money they have left – whether to purchase medication, pay for medical treatment or put food on the table.

One mother of four, severely injured in a suicide bomb attack, went through a long and arduous recuperation process and was then diagnosed with cancer. She travels to and from hospital to undergo radiation treatment and chemotherapy, and returns home exhausted. Because of her condition she is unable to work and her husband’s salary barely covers the most basic costs. OneFamily is there for them.

Last month, OneFamily was chosen to be featured at the General Assembly at the AIPAC Policy Conference in Washington. Michal Belzberg, the Bat Mitzvah girl who founded the organization 18 years ago, told the 18,000 attendees about how we help thousands of Israeli terror victims to move forward and rebuild their lives.

Chantal Belzberg says: “What is unique about OneFamily is that we have a staff of professionals reaching out to terror victims and their families at the hospitals, during the shiva, and after their friends and relatives have gone home. They hold their hands and make sure they know that whenever they need anything, there’s always someone for them to turn to. Always.”

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You may remember the pop song “Red Rubber Ball,” written by Paul Simon and recorded by The Cyrkle, a verse of which seems so appropriate for the moment:

The roller-coaster ride we took is nearly at an end; I bought my ticket with my tears, that’s all I’m gonna spend....

These last weeks have been an emotional roller-coaster for the Jewish people, bringing smiles to our faces as we soared to thrilling heights only to feel the pit of our stomachs as we plummeted into the depths. The “bookends” of this unique stretch of our calendar began with Pesach and the Seder night, as we celebrated our entrance into peoplehood. It ends on Yom HaAtzmaut, when we shall rejoice over our rebirth as a proud and independent nation in our own Land.

Sandwiched in between these glorious events are intense moments of sadness and solemnity. These began on the last day of Pesach, when we recited the Yizkor memorial prayers for our departed loved ones. A week later, we went on to Yom HaShoa, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and seven days after that, Yom HaZikaron, Remembrance Day for our fallen soldiers.

Like many Israelis, I live between two sirens. There is the one which sounds on Yom HaShoa, when I mourn my many relatives who perished in Poland, and honor my mother-in-law, who spent her 16th birthday in Auschwitz, and the one which wails on Yom HaZikaron, in a cry of commemoration for all the heroic men and women of our holy armed forces, including our eldest son Ari Hhy’d, who fell in battle 17 years ago.

Sadly, these sirens evoke not only the past but the present as well. I feel that the same ill wind that blew over Europe, as the Germans emptied the continent of its Jews in a brash and brutal blitzkrieg, is polluting our air once again. After too few years of respite, the term “Jew” has returned to its status as the ultimate curse word. Anti-Zionism is rampant, as marches to “liberate” Jerusalem proliferate around the globe, and Nazi symbols desecrate graveyards worldwide.

Our enemies seek weapons of mass destruction that threaten our State, and even in “the home of the free and the brave” there are mounting incidents of anti-Semitism. We turn on the news with trepidation; where will the next outrage against our innocents occur?

But then I remind myself that, despite all the signs of crisis around us, there is a pronounced and powerful difference between then and now. In the years before and during the Holocaust, we were powerless, defenseless. We waited for some knight in shining armor to come and rescue us, and he never appeared. He did not bomb Auschwitz’s rail lines, he did not open the gates to our desperate citizens seeking asylum. He did not raise a hue and cry in Congress; he did not join our ghetto fighters as we rose up courageously in Warsaw. No, he stood by silently, and he willingly collaborated with our oppressors in our destruction.

But now we have an army, a navy, and the best air force in the world. G-d has blessed us with the finest soldiers and they are sworn to our protection. They will not let us ever again be attacked with impunity. They have been to the death camps and marched to Birkenau, wrapped proudly in the flag of Israel. They fully understand what our enemies are capable of and they form a wall of deterrence surrounding us. They live on the front, but they have our backs. They are the definition of everything good that derives from sovereignty, and they are the antidote to all the deadly ills that flow from statelessness.

Before the last battle against the Germans began at Muranowski Square in the Warsaw Ghetto, Betar’s leader, Pawel Frenkel, addressed his youthful soldiers: “Fellow Jews,” he said, “In all likelihood, we will die young. But we are not doomed; the world will hear of us, and we will yet have our place in history.”

The sirens we sound at this time of year are a clarion call that evokes the days of danger and despair, for we have indeed traveled a long and winding road of trial and tribulation. But the “last word” of this period, the last sound we hear, is the ecstatic music of happiness and joy which celebrates our re-emergence on the world stage as a proud and prosperous nation – Am Yisrael Chai!

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The Midrash asks, “Which of Avraham’s nisyonot (tests) was harder – the first or the last?”

What a strange question! Can one compare the challenge of slitting a precious son’s throat to that of traveling nomadically for a while? But if Chazal ask this question, there must be a reason.

Yes, sacrificing a child is a challenge of great magnitude, but the nisyon of Lech Lecha was not easy either – Avraham had no idea when the nisyon would end, and waiting indefinitely is indeed an oft-excruciating challenge.

Choni HaMe’agel was never able to understand how Am Yisrael would endure the harrowing wait for the Geula: כָּל יָמַי הָיִיתִי מִצְטַעֵר עַל הַפָּסוּק, “All my life I’ve found it hard to understand the verse והשֹׁבֵב את ציון הָיִינוּ כְּחוֹלְמִים,” that when the Geula finally comes, all of our previous pains will seem like a dream to us. “I can’t believe that,” he would say, “I can’t wait that long.” Choni was accustomed to standing in the circle he formed with his stick, asking G-d for rain, and watching it fall instantly. He didn’t appreciate the concept of waiting – until he fell into his 70-year sleep.

Because he couldn’t bear to wait, G-d gave him the opportunity to sleep through the 70 years between the First and Second Temples, and to awaken to a new world. When he saw the carob saplings he had observed right before falling asleep were now a gigantic, fruitful tree, he said to G-d, “I don’t want to live anymore.” Why? Because at that moment he came to the realization that he had misunderstood the beauty of waiting. No, you don’t go to sleep until the wait is over. That is not the way to deal with a challenge. We must push ourselves through this lech lecha in order to emerge victorious. Like our forefather Avraham, if we want to reap the benefits we must persevere with the journey whose end is still unclear.

And what are the benefits of this arduous journey?

First, we discover the good people in our lives. During a time of challenge, our real friends step up for us. Before G-d challenged him with 10 nisyonot, Avraham had three friends: Aner, Eshkol, and Mamrei. Why did G-d choose to speak to him davka at Elonei Mamrei? Because Mamrei was Avraham’s only real friend. Mamrei was the only one to encourage him to perform a brit mila.

Another benefit of the arduous challenge of Lech Lecha was what it did for Avraham and Sarah’s marriage. After much wandering, Avraham turned to Sarah and said, “I have now discovered what a beautiful woman you are.” Did he only see her beauty for the first time on that journey? Rashi explains that Avraham turned to Sarah and said that during a long journey a woman loses her beauty, but you, my wife, stayed beautiful because G-d is with you.

Unfortunately, a challenge can easily unravel the threads of a marriage. But when a husband and wife transcend beyond their pain and strengthen themselves with emunah, working together to encourage and support one another during those difficult moments, the relationship reaches new levels that would otherwise be unattainable.

We learn the last precious jewel from Rachel. There is no woman in the world who traveled a longer journey than she. First, she waited for her zivug (match); then, for the birth of her first child. Nothing came easily to Rachel – not even her burial. For every gift in her life, Rachel had to wait; who if not she could teach us about the power of Tefillat HaDerech (the prayer for a journey)?

When the Kohen Gadol entered the Kodesh HaKodashim on Yom Kippur, he said a short prayer for Am Yisrael – that no woman miscarries, that the nation be blessed with bounty, and that G-d should not answer the prayers of those travelers asking for the rain to cease. Let the rain fall on travelers? Is this what the Kohen Gadol prays for on the holiest day of the year?

Yes, because the tefillah of someone travelling is precious in the eyes of G-d. The prayer of someone being challenged by a lech lecha, a Jew subject to the pain of indefinite waiting, reaches a special place in Heaven.

Such is our journey to the Final Redemption.

May G-d bless all of those traveling along never-ending roads and may they – and all of Am Yisrael – finally reach their destination – וְשָׁבוּ בָּנִים לִגְבוּלָם.
5 Challenges Facing Israel in Western Societies.

According to the United Nations World Happiness Report for 2019, Israel is the 13th happiest nation (out of 156 countries). The report ranks six key variables: GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and freedom from corruption. And that’s even with all our security concerns! Am Yisrael Chai! Am Yisrael Sameach!

**Israelis are happy:**

According to the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), 51% of Israelis aged 25-64 have received a tertiary education. This makes this field. Even more impressive is that the average university education in Israel costs approximately $3,000 a year! Israel has also produced 12 Nobel Prize winners in our 71 short years, which is the 12th highest per capita.

**Education:**

According to the Reputation Institute, world! In its first decade (2006-2016), the UN Human Rights Council passed a total of 68 resolutions against Israel, more than against the rest of the world. The results are shocking! The more we try to explain Israel, the more misunderstandings occur.

**History:**

Our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov walked across Israel from the north to the south, the Beit HaMikdash stood here, Herod built palaces here, Ben-Gurion read the Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv and archeologists continue to discover treasures from days gone by.

**Everyone cares about each other:**

When southern Israel was recently under rocket attack, many Israelis opened up their homes to families looking to get away from constant sirens. People are always sending food and care packages to soldiers and it’s all for one and one for all.

**Beautiful nature:**

It’s never a long drive to find a stunning site – whether it’s the Dead Sea, the hills overlooking the Kinneret, crane migration in the Hula Valley, blooming red flowers in the south, and so much more.

**Easy to be Jewish:**

Israel is the easiest place to be Jewish. With an abundance of kosher food available, a majority of Jews, and Shabbat and Chagim as national days off, what else could you ask for? Well, there are also over 120,000 Torah students in Israel, studying in more than 1,500 yeshivot and seminaries.

**Longevity:**

Israelis live long lives! The average life expectancy is 82.5 years of age, the 8th highest in the world! One study suggests the main reason is military service, which forces us to be fit at a critical stage in our lives, thus adding an average of about three years to our life expectancy. Other theories include Israel’s healthy geographical location (close to the sea and not far from the equator) and the fact that Israeli society is more religious (and hence spiritually healthier, which has effects on physical health too) than other Western societies.
5 Challenges Facing Israel in 2019

Strengthening the Connection between...

In 2017, Israeli President, Reuven Rivlin, told members of the Jewish Federation of America: “We will never give up on our brothers of Diaspora Jewry. We will never turn our backs on the members of our family who live outside the Land of Israel.” Aside from encouraging our fellow Jews to make aliyah, and providing a Zionist education, what more can Israeli society do to help Jews overseas? Aside from sending financial assistance and coming on vacation to Israel, what more can Diaspora Jewry do for Israel?

How to Run a Jewish but Democratic State

Israel's population is an estimated 9,005,180, of whom 74.5% are Jews. The remainder includes Arabs, Christians, and migrant workers. Israel is a free state, where anyone can practice their religion. Indeed, one need not even be Jewish to retain the rights granted to citizens of Israel. At the same time, Israel passed the Nation State Law, which specifies the nature of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. The practical ramifications of this need deeper clarification.

How to Maintain a Secure Israel?

General Amos Yadlin recently spoke at Israel’s National Security Challenges Seminar about the four volatile fronts Israel could face in the coming year: Gaza, Iran’s consolidation in Syria and Lebanon, the risk of another round of conflict with Hezbollah, and the Iranian nuclear threat. This is of course in addition to our closest neighbors who live among us and carry out frequent terror attacks.

How to Change International Opinion about Israel?

According to the Reputation Institute, Israel is the 14th most hated country in the world! In its first decade (2006-2016), the UN Human Rights Council passed a total of 68 resolutions against Israel, more than against the rest of the world combined! Not to mention the 225+ resolutions passed against Israel by the UN General Assembly and increasing anti-Israel sentiment all over the globe.

How to Create Unity in Diversity?

43 different parties took part in last month’s election! If we can’t agree among ourselves, how can Israel create a strong united front against our ideological enemies?

A 2016 Pew survey found deep divisions in Israeli society, not only between Israeli Jews and the Arab minority, but also among the religious subgroups that make up Israeli Jewry. The survey even found that secular Jews in Israel are more concerned about their children marrying an ultra-Orthodox Jew than they are about them marrying out.

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In the Talmud we find in a number of instances that even though circumstances may have changed or that the halacha has apparently overruled a practice in one direction or another, the rabbis nevertheless did not change the original practice because "perhaps the matter will revert back to its original unacceptable state."

Thus even though the present does not exactly mirror the past any longer, nevertheless the problems and dangers of the past must be taken into account in formulating present behavior and halachic decision.

The concept in Judaism is that even though we may have computers and cell phones today and our ancestors were not so equipped, the lessons of our ancestors and their safeguards in Jewish and general life should not be so easily dismissed today.

The Vilna Gaon, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, taught us that for every apparent reason used to explain why a rabbinic decree was originally legislated and enforced, there are many hidden and subtle reasons that justify the existence of that decree.

Therefore, merely stating that circumstances have changed and that the stated reason for the decree no longer applies, in no way invalidates the decree itself since all of these unknown – and almost prophetic – reasons for the decree still exist.

One of these reasons is the idea mentioned earlier – perhaps the situation today will somehow revert back to the same one that existed at the time of the original formulation of the decree.

The circumstances surrounding the Jewish people changed drastically 71 years ago after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Jews had a sense that the world would never allow another such Holocaust to recur. Israel and the Israelis were seen as brave, progressive, heroic and justified in defending their lives and their land.

The State was granted legitimacy by the United Nations and by much of the world. It was a fairly heady time for Jews. Open anti-Semitism was no longer socially and academically acceptable and individual Jews rose to power, wealth and influence in growing numbers undreamt of a century earlier.

Jews in the United States felt so much a part of American society that they no longer classified themselves as belonging to a minority group. Thus 40 million Hispanics and 30 million African-Americans are officially characterized as belonging to minority groups while five million American Jews are not!

The State of Israel grew and developed and was seemingly the strongest power, militarily and economically, in its area and among its immediate neighbors.

All of this allowed for a weakening of faith in ourselves and for complacency that minimized outside threats and internal betrayals of purpose and policy. People, especially in the media and academia, Jews and non-Jews, began to enter the "post" period of thought.

Post-Zionism, post-Jewish solidarity, post-anti-Semitism but present supposedly legitimate anti-Israel complaints, post-Torah observances, post-Jewish uniqueness... in short, the past was gone and we now live in a new world where we don’t fear the pogroms, bigotry and dangers that once were our daily lot.

But a strange thing occurred in our brave new world. The old world, about which the rabbis of the Talmud warned us, somehow returned. Existential danger to the Jewish State from Muslim fundamentalism, anti-Semitic verbal, physical and media attacks, have returned all over Europe.

It has again become fashionable in many circles to blame the Jews for all of the world's ills. The rhetoric against Israel and Jews today has returned to the levels of the 1920s just prior to Hitler's rise to power in Germany.

There are many, including those in powerful government positions in the Jewish world, who somehow still prefer whistling past the graveyard. But in their wisdom, the rabbis of the Talmud always warned us that the old can and oftentimes does return again to haunt and confound us.

History has a bite and a sting to it, especially Jewish history. In this season of commemoration of the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel, we should view our current Jewish world through the prism of that past Jewish world.

Circumstances are never the same from one generation to the next. But problems, dangers and weaknesses have a tendency to be consistent and repetitive.

The wise and prudent will always heed the advice of the Talmud and remember that the past situations may yet occur again. We should therefore be prepared somehow to deal with such possibilities.

Rabbi Berel Wein is Senior Rabbi of Beit Knesset HaNassi in Jerusalem and Director of the Destiny Foundation.
Degel, דגל, is an interesting word. In Modern Hebrew, the only meaning is “flag” but that has not always been the case.

In the Tanach, the word degel primarily appears in the beginning of the book Bamidbar, in the section describing the arrangement of the camp (1:52):

וְחָנוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ עַל מַחֲנֵהוּ וְאִישׁ עַל אֶחָד לִצְבָּאוֹתָם.

The JPS translation is: “The Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard”. The translation of degel here is “standard”, which originally meant a “flag or other conspicuous object to serve as a rallying point for a military force”.

However Prof. Jacob Milgrom, in his JPS commentary on Bamidbar, disagrees with the translation of degel as “standard”:

“Hebrew degel possibly originally meant a military banner. This is supported by the Akkadian dagalu, ‘to look’ … The meaning ‘banner’ was later extended by association to include the army division, just as shevet and mattech, the two terms for ‘tribe’, were probably derived from the ‘rod’ that served as the official tribal insignia … The meaning ‘unit’ better fits the context here, as verse 3 shows.”

Verse 3 that Milgrom refers to says:

לְצִבְאֹתָם.

The JPS translates it as “Camped on the front, or east side: the standard. of the division of Judah, troop by troop.” But Milgrom notes that the translation should read rather, “camped … the unit”. The verb “camped” renders the translation of degel more likely as “unit” than “standard.”

Daat Mikra also agrees that “unit” is the meaning of degel here, writing that this was the meaning not only in the Tanach, but in Rabbinic Hebrew as well, as in the Midrash (Shmot Rabba 16:7): “Degalim means none other than troops”. Unlike Milgrom, Daat Mikra claims that the meaning of “flag” is secondary, and derived from the original meaning of “division, unit.”

Either the development from “flag” to “the unit under the flag”, or from “unit” to “the flag representing the unit” is easy to accept. However, most scholars say that throughout the Tanach, degel meant unit.

Apparently, the adoption of degel as “flag” happened in the post-Talmudic period. Where do we first find it? One possibility is Rashi, who writes on Bamidbar 2:2:

לְצִבְאֹתָם.

The problem is how do we translate this Rashi?

Metsudah translates: “Each banner shall have [as] its insignia a colored cloth hanging from it.” They translate degel as “banner”, which is certainly the popular understanding of the word. However, it is difficult in this context – why would a banner have a cloth hanging from it?

Judaica Press changes the translation, so that degel means division: “Every division shall have its own flag staff, with a colored flag hanging on it.” They translate ot, อutting, as “flag staff”, which is likely to having a flag hanging from it.

ArtScroll also offers “division” for degel, with a slight variation in translation from Judaica Press: “Every division shall have for itself a sign, namely, a colored sheet of cloth hanging in its midst.” The main difference is how they translate ot – ArtScroll says that the ot was the cloth. In their notes on Rashi on 1:52, they write: “Unlike other commentators, who understandるのが לְגִיְּם as ‘flag’, Rashi sees it as ‘division, disposition of forces, military formation.’ This is indicated by his comments to 2:2 … See Rashi to Isaiah 5:26, s.v. נַעֲלַים, where he describes a flag in detail, yet never once uses the word נַעֲלַים.”

Who are these “other commentators”? The earliest one I could find is Ibn Ezra, who writes that “the insignia were on every degel” and goes on to describe the images on the degel of each tribe.

In the 19th century, Shadal wrote: “Degel didn’t originally mean banner or flag, because that is the meaning of ot, as in ‘each with his degel, under the banners (otot)’. But rather it is like Onkelos and all the early translations, ‘an ordered grouping’ … and you will see that throughout the section degel refers to people, not banners … But after time, the word was borrowed for the meaning ‘flag’, since every degel had a flag…”

And in the end, Ben-Yehuda writes that today, in both speech and literature, the only meaning of degel is “flag.”

So we’ve seen a word transform from referring to an actual group of people, to a flag that symbolizes them.

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The SECRETS of the SHOMRON
SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE, CLOSE TO EVERYTHING

Just a hop, skip and jump from Kfar Saba, Ra’anana or Netanya is the Shomron, a beautiful stretch of land in the center of Israel, spanning eastward from the Sharon to the Jordan Valley, north to the Jezreel Valley and south to Judea. Its name is derived from Shemer, the landowner who sold the land to Omri the king of Israel to build the city of Shomron (Kings1 16:24). Shomron was the capital city of the Israel kingdom for over 1,000 years. When King Herod rebuilt the city, he changed its name to Sebastia. The Shomron was home to the tribes of Ephraim, Binyamin and half the tribe of Menashe.

The terrain – mountains and valleys with flat fields – is filled with breathtaking views and landscapes. The Shomron can truly be called the Land of the Bible. We can trace the history of Am Yisrael as they came up through Nachal Tirza to Shechem, the highest mountains, to receive the blessings and the curses, and eventually brought the Mishkan to rest in Shiloh.

Through the centuries the region changed hands, with wars and bloodshed. After the Israelites, came the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Crusaders Ottoman Turks and finally the British, who called it the Mandatory Palestine District of Samaria until 1948, when it became Jordanian-controlled territory. During the Six-Day War the Shomron was recaptured by Israel and in 1974 we began to claim our rightful place once more. Gush Emunim established a settlement in Sebastia, which was promptly removed by the IDF. It took a total of eight attempts to establish a Jewish yishuv (settlement). Finally, an agreement was reached and the settlers moved to Kadum, an army base nearby and thus Kedumim, the first of many yishuvim, was established.

Today the Shomron houses two large cities, Ariel and Modi’in Illit (Kiryat Sefer), as well as large suburban municipalities such as Karnei Shomron, Alfei Menashe, Barkan, Beit-El, Elkana, Givat Ze’ev, Beit Arye-Ofarim, Emanuel, to name a few. The Shomron Regional Municipality has 33 yishuvim under its jurisdiction and the Binyamin Regional Municipality has 49.

Lifestyle in the Shomron is modern and suburban. Bypass roads in many areas cut down travel time and add to safety. Biking and hiking, horseback riding and jogging in the hills and valleys is part of the daily Shomron routine. Communities cater to all sectors – religious, secular and mixed; Bnei Akiva, Ariel, Tzofim (scouts) and Beitar youth organizations are vibrant. Young and old find the “Israeli Dream” in diverse and inclusive neighborhoods. Education begins with day care, elementary and high schools, Hesder Yeshivot, Midrashot and a University (Ariel) all located conveniently in the Shomron. While cities in central Israel are not far, most yishuvim are self-contained, with kupot cholim (medical clinics), banks, post office, supermarkets, clothing stores, housewares, pizza parlors, cafes, restaurants, bakeries, wineries and grocery stores never far away. There are swimming pools and gyms, and educational classes of all kinds. And for those who aren’t fluent in Hebrew, flourishing Anglo communities abound in the Shomron, including Neve Aliza in Karnei Shomron. Almost every yishuv is home to olim from all over the world. Being part of a community is the heart of what yishuv life is all about. Seniors especially truly live a golden life in the Shomron.

One of the Shomron’s great attractions is the comfort and the comparatively low cost of living. As well as nature at its best with lots of clean air, spectacular panoramas and freedom for children, housing costs are also a big benefit. While a 5-room, 120m² apartment in Jerusalem or Ra’anana can start at close to 3 million NIS, a much larger 300m² private or semi-detached house with a yard, will cost considerably less in many Shomron communities. Housing options range from townhouses, private or semi-detached houses with yards, to terraced apartments and low-rise apartment buildings.

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On Yom HaAtzma’ut, we recite Psalm 107, as instituted by the first Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel. Its inclusion, I believe, captures the intentions of the psalmist, who wrote this hymn as a song of praise to celebrate the independence of the Jewish people and their return to their own land...

In all my years at Yeshivat Mercaz HaRav, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda HaKohen Kook, zt”l, would open his Yom HaAtzma’ut sermon with the two concluding verses of this psalm:

The upright see and rejoice, but the mouth of all wrongdoers is stopped. Whoever is wise, let him lay these things to heart, And reflect on the loving-kindness of the Lord.

I only understood their full significance when I began to study the psalm. Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda would question: Why does the psalmist refer to those who meditate on G-d’s kindness as “the upright” (יְשָׁרִים) and not “the righteous” (צַדִּיקִים)? His answer was based on the famous passage from the Talmud, which interprets the verse in Zechariah as referring to the righteous in the World to Come:

Why is it written: “Who has despised the day of small things”? What causes the tables of the righteous to be despoiled in the World to Come? The smallness [of faith] which was in them, for they did not trust in the Holy One, blessed be He. (Sota 48b)

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda would marvel at this verse: How can the Talmud refer to people who do not trust in G-d as “righteous”? Righteous people who are not “believers”? His answer was unequivocal: indeed, there are righteous people who are not believers. There are righteous people with true virtues, people of righteous inner character, who indeed do not meditate upon G-d’s kindness. The special individuals the psalm is referring to, the “upright,” are the ones who do praise G-d for His goodness, even when everyone else is complaining.

Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda was one of these “upright” people. On the eve of the Six-Day War, he gave a famous speech about how his soul was torn as he heard the announcement of the UN partition plan in 1947: a Jewish state would be founded, but only on part of the Land of Israel…Although he had not prayed for a state that divided the land, he understood that this was a divine decision, and rejoiced with all his being.

While some upright individuals can see the kind hand of G-d and rejoice, others see only despair. Despair is as old as Zionism, as old as the Jewish people. It is the shadow of faith. Despair can be read in the poetry of Bialik and the writings of Brenner; in Rahel Bluwstein mournful lyrics during the famine of 1927 and in the ominous, fearful reports that preceded the Six-Day War. It is no easy task to meditate upon G-d’s kindness.

Psalm 107, a song of the ingathering of exiles, is also wrought with difficulties and pain. It does not depict a rapid overnight redemption, but rather a process similar to the Exodus from Egypt, which unfolded over 480 years until the Temple was finally built. Nowadays, we are not experiencing a fraction of the anguish and suffering that was endured by the previous generation and the generation before that. On the fifth of Iyar, 1948, the psalmist’s vision was fulfilled: for the very first time, ships were officially admitted to the docks of Haifa, ships filled with survivors of the Holocaust and refugees from all over the world. This is the vision of Psalm 107, and this is the opening of the evening prayers for Yom HaAtzma’ut, the day that commemorates the renewal of the independence of the Jewish state in the Land of Israel.

The full article appears in the Koren Krengel World Mizrachi Edition Yom HaAtzma’ut Mahzor, with the Maidenbaum & Rothenberg essay collection. See www.korenpub.com for details.

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A-Z Quiz
How well does your family know Israel?

While you’re enjoying your Yom HaAtzmaut celebrations, share this A-Z Quiz with your family and friends. (clue: the answer begins with the letter of the alphabet ;)

A: On which continent is Israel located?
B: Who was Israel’s first Prime Minister?
C: What small, red, tasty salad ingredient were engineered in Israel?
D: What is the lowest point in Israel (and on Earth!)?
E: What is the southernmost city in Israel?
F: What is Israel’s national food?
G: What is Israel’s national animal?
H: What is the name of Israel’s national anthem?
I: What is the name of the building in Tel Aviv, where Ben Gurion declared Israel as a State?
J: What is the capital of Israel?
K: What is the name of Israel’s parliament?
L: What was Ben-Gurion Airport called before Ben-Gurion Airport?
M: What is the Hebrew word for barbecue, a popular Yom HaAtzmaut pastime in Israel?
N: Name three places in Israel beginning with the letter N.
O: What is Israel’s national tree?
P: The Hebrew word for cow?
Q: Where were the Dead Sea Scrolls found?
R: Who is the current President of Israel?
S: In what sport did Israel win a gold medal at the Olympics?
T: How do we say ‘thank you’ in Hebrew?
U: You make up your own Israel question for this one!
V: What technology designed to convey a caller’s recorded audio message to a recipient was developed in Israel?
W: What is the only remaining part of the Second Temple?
X: Which of Microsoft’s two most popular operating systems was developed primarily in Israel?
Y: The Hebrew word for Jew?
Z: What is the name of the nationalist movement to create a homeland for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel?

Answers:

A: Asia
B: Ben-Gurion
C: Cherry Tomatoes
D: Dead Sea
E: Eilat
F: Falafel
G: Gazelle
H: Hatikva
I: Independence Hall
J: Jerusalem
K: Knesset
L: Lod Airport
M: Mangal
N: Netanya, Nahariya, Nechushtan, Neve Daniel, Neve Tzuf, Nebi Samuel, Nataf, and more.
O: Olive tree
P: Parah
Q: Qumran Caves
R: Reuven Rivlin
T: Toda
U: ?
V: Voicemail
W: Western Wall or Wailing Wall
X: XP
Y: Yehudi
Z: Zionism
A: Asia
B: Ben-Gurion
C: Cherry Tomatoes
D: Dead Sea
E: Eilat
F: Falafel
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