

WHAT ARE WE

Celebrating?



“Olmert is not a run-of-the-mill criminal, mired in the crime world, but rather a criminal who operated while working in his public roles, for the public good. His talents and the important work he did propelled him to summits – but were used as a platform for the corrupt offenses he engaged in, in parallel to his normative work.” (The Judge’s words at the sentencing of former Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert)

In the past 12 months, we have witnessed our current Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, be indicted for bribery. In the last decade in Israel, a former Prime Minister has been convicted and received a jail sentence, many public officials have been accused and in some cases convicted of bribery, major scandals involving different types of abuse have broken out in the highest ranks of the police force and a former Chief Rabbi has been charged and jailed for money laundering. All of these incidents must make us ask what are we celebrating this Yom HaAtzmaut? Is this the State we and our ancestors prayed for on a daily basis? Is this the “Light unto the Nations” we were taught was the point of our existence?

“Yet many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers’ households, the old men who had seen the first Temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, while many shouted aloud for joy.” (Ezra 3:12)



This sentence was often quoted by my Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yehuda Amital z"l, when explaining the attitudes of the older and younger generations to the State of Israel. Rav Amital would explain that when it came to the State of Israel it was exactly the opposite of what is described in Ezra. In our generation, it is the elderly who shout with joy at the mere fact that Israel was created.

Many years ago, there was an elderly European *chassid* who worked in a certain yeshiva. He was not raised on the values of Zionism, yet he danced with tremendous fervor on Yom HaAtzmaut. He would say, "After what I went through in Warsaw, how could I *not* dance?" The younger generation, however, who did not experience the horrors of the Holocaust, are not always as ecstatic when they see the country not living up to its potential.

Nevertheless, I believe one does not have to have experienced the Holocaust to feel great joy and gratitude to the Almighty on Israel's Independence Day. This can be expressed in three different ways.

On the first level, for the first time in over 2,000 years, the Jewish people have a sovereign government. Israel has taken its place among the community of nations. Jewish men and women now fight in the Israeli Army which is protecting the Jewish people. No longer is our fate determined by other nations and peoples.

Secondly, this Jewish sovereignty is happening in the Land of Israel. The Land promised to our forefather Avraham and the Land Moshe pleaded to enter after guiding the Jewish people through the desert. This sovereignty is not happening

in Australia or Uganda but in Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital. Our dream has not just been fulfilled through sovereignty but through sovereignty in a Land that has been in the thoughts and prayers of generations for thousands of years.

Lastly, I believe the creation of the Jewish people created a major shift in the mentality and identity of Jews worldwide. After the Holocaust, when one-third of our people was annihilated, we were downtrodden and embarrassed. Many people expected us to quietly disappear. Yet the exact opposite occurred. Barely three years later, we managed to beat back numerous Arab armies and declare a State of our own. Once again, the Jewish people are proud of who they are. Once again, they stand tall amongst the nations. Still today much of the Jewish pride of so many of us is based on the existence of the Jewish people. We feel tied up with the destiny of this little country, no matter what.

The former Chief Rabbi of Britain, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, put it beautifully while describing his experiences during the Six-Day War as a university student in England: *"It was then that an extraordinary thing began to happen. Throughout the university Jews suddenly became visible. Day after day they crowded into the little synagogue in the centre of town. Students and dons who had never before publicly identified as Jews could be found there praying. Others began collecting money. Everyone wanted to help in some way, to express their solidarity, their identification with Israel's fate. It was some time before we realised that the same phenomenon was repeating itself throughout the world. From the United States to the*

Soviet Union, Jews were riveted to their television screens and radios, anxious to hear the latest news, involved, on the edge, as if it were their own lives that were at stake. The rest is history. The war was fought and won. It lasted a mere six days, one of the most spectacular victories in modern history. We could celebrate and breathe safely again. Life went back to normal.

But not completely. For I had witnessed something in those days and weeks that didn't make sense in the rest of my world. It has nothing to do with politics or war or even prayer. It had to do with Jewish identity. Collectively the Jewish people had looked in the mirror and said, We are still Jews. And by that, they meant more than a private declaration of faith, 'religion' in the conventional sense of the word. It meant that they felt part of a people, involved in its fate, implicated in its destiny, caught up in its tragedy, exhilarated by its survival. I had felt it. So had every other Jew I knew."

We are all part of this collective miracle of the Jewish people. Whilst there are things that happen in this remarkable country that leave much room for improvement, we must also remember how much it has achieved in such a short time. So this Yom HaAtzmaut, let us celebrate this incredible and ongoing miracle. Let us continue to pray for the State of Israel, *"the first manifestation of the approach of our redemption."* Let us ask G-d to bestow His *"light and truth upon its leaders, ministers, and advisors, and grace them with Your good counsel."*

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