



What Covid Taught Us About the State of Israel

Crisis brings out the worst and best in people and peoples. Celebrating the anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel a year into and hopefully emerging from the Corona pandemic is an excellent time to reflect on what we have learned about ourselves as a people and about the State of Israel. On the one hand, we have been reminded of the special qualities of *Am Yisrael* as a people and, on the other, about the challenges of returning to and building a country after thousands of years in exile.

Mi KeAmcha Yisrael We Value Human Life

Judaism places a very high premium on life. We are commanded (not just allowed) to violate Shabbat and almost all of our *mitzvot* in the face of even a potential threat to human life. In fact, *halacha* brands one who is cavalier about human life a *rotzeach* (murderer).

Israel has one of the world's lowest Covid deaths:infections ratios. One of the reasons for this is our health professionals' devotion to helping the infected recover. This devotion is reflective of the value they and we place on saving and sustaining human life.

Am Yisrael as a whole also showed its appreciation for human life at the beginning of the pandemic, when we respected the guidelines of the first closure and safely distanced ourselves from our parents, grandparents and close relatives even during the *chagim*.

As opposed to many countries who prioritized keeping their economy and travel/leisure open above protecting human life, we have been consistent in prioritizing human life.

We have also shown this in the extensive and intensive vaccination drive.

Working Together with a Common Goal

The vaccination drive also showed our ingenuity and ability to work well together as a people and country when we share a common goal. The fact that we managed to acquire and administer one of the world's highest percentages of vaccines so quickly is truly remarkable.

Benny Gantz and his party's decision to join the Netanyahu government (after they had previously promised not to join) is also a great expression of our ability to prioritize the value of human life and our common goals.

Where We Are Lacking

There is, unfortunately, another side to the story. Sadly, as Corona dragged on for months, many people grew tired of the restrictions and lost faith in the government and its guidelines. We saw this from many different segments and sides of the political spectrum. Mass gatherings for funerals, protests, organizational and individual disregard for guidelines, and even document forgeries.

Feelings of tiredness and even loss of faith are very understandable and there are many government decisions that can definitely be criticized. That said, it is important to understand that the only way to properly face national challenges is by having a government that coordinates our joint efforts. As a people in exile, we grew accustomed to living in countries run by governments often antisemitic or at least unsympathetic to their Jewish population and their

needs. We grew accustomed to needing to work around governments to protect our individual needs in situations when the national authority was attacking or even just neglecting us.

Now, *Baruch Hashem*, we have returned to our own state. This does not mean our government is perfect, but it does mean it is our government – elected by us and committed to our health and success. Even if one is of a different political persuasion and/or disagrees with the government's decisions, disrespecting its guidelines threatens the basic notion of its ability to play its critical national role.

Obviously, the State of Israel's current political instability and hostility has not helped matters. We can only hope that the recent election will help bring a stable government that can strengthen our sense of statehood.

On Yom HaAtzmaut, we celebrate the founding of our State. After a Corona year that reminded us of our values and unique abilities, but also challenged our sense of statehood, it is critical that this year's celebration reinforces our appreciation of what the great *zechut* of having the State of Israel demands of us.



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Rabbanit Shani Taragin

Shemini to Acharei Mot, Yom HaZikaron to Yom HaAtzmaut

This year, the fifth of Iyar coincides with the *parshiyot* of Tazria and Metzora, in which we learn of the laws of *tzara'at*, a spiritual and physical malady that renders the afflicted *tamei*: limited from access to the *Mikdash* and removed from the social camp. These *parshiyot* are preceded by Shemini, the narrative of the tragic deaths of Nadav and Avihu at the *Mishkan's* inauguration.

The Torah charges the *metzora* to rend his garments, leave his hair to grow, cover his mouth and publicly declare his state of ritual impurity. Then, as an independent imperative, the Torah commands the *metzora* to live in isolation. The first two commandments remind us of the laws of mourning following the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, as Moshe had instructed Aharon and his remaining sons not to let their hair grow and not to rend their clothes in response to their loss, while the rest of the nation will “bewail the burning.”

In contrast, the *metzora* is not mourning for a relative, but for himself, as if he has died. As such, *Chazal* formulated that “a *metzora* is considered dead” (Rashi, Bamidbar 12:12, based on Sifrei). That is why the last requirement is mentioned separately; it constitutes the very essence of his “death.” The *metzora* must detach himself from communal life, in which the *Shechina* resides, separating himself from public partnership in the community, from the life of the nation.

The process through which he returns to “life,” as he makes his way back into society, consists of three stages: 1. He returns to the camp by bringing two birds. 2. After seven days of residence in

the camp, he returns to his tent. 3. On the eighth day, with special sacrifices, he returns to the *Mishkan*. The ceremony of slaughtering a bird over fresh water, dipping a live bird in its blood and then sending it away, marks the transition from life to death, the rebirth of the *metzora*. The *metzora*, whose disease surfaced on his body with white, dead-colored skin, is “brought back to life” with crimson-colored water and bird’s blood, symbolizing the return to live, healthy flesh.

We may now understand the juxtaposition of the respective *parshiyot* read at this time of year. After the deaths of Nadav and Avihu on *Yom HaShemini* (the eighth day following the inaugural preparations, when the *Shechina* was manifest), we encounter laws of defilement related to childbirth and then the pseudo-death of the *metzora*. But on the same Shabbat, we also read of the process of purification and restoration to individual and communal life. The following Shabbat, we read *parashat* Acharei Mot, commanding Aharon to purify the *Mishkan* on Yom Kippur, as he dons *bigdei haBad*, special white linen garments, and brings *ketoret*, annually revisiting this sons’ deaths.

As he wears the white garments, the *Kohen Gadol* detaches himself from his gold and crimson priestly vestments and wears the garments worn by a *Kohen Hedyot*, a regular *kohen*. Every Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* revisits *Yom HaShemini*, the initial consecration of the *Mishkan*. The core relationship between these two events is to annually restore the *Mishkan* to its earliest beginnings prior to impurities, when the *Shechina* was first manifest.

Simultaneously however, we are reminded of the deaths that accompanied the eighth day. Aharon wears the same uniform as his sons did and reenacts their bringing of the *ketoret*. Every year he dons white garments, symbolizing the color of death, as he revisits the deaths of his sons, and all the sons of Israel that have left the “camp of life,” like the *metzora*. Yet every Yom Kippur – as he sprinkles the blood of the bull and the goat, like the sprinkling of the blood of the bird of the *metzora* – he reminds us that *kappara* may be achieved and the *tumah* of death shall be removed.

Every *Yom HaZikaron*, dressed in blue – together with our white – we remember the tragic deaths of our soldiers and terror victims, young sons and daughters, who remind us of our own mortality. And the day after, as we read the *parshiyot* of transition from death to life, from *Shoa* to *Tekuma*, from white to gold, crimson, and *techelet*, we raise our flags and celebrate the “inauguration” of the State of Israel, a modern manifestation of the *Shechina's* return to our midst.

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