



Celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut in America of the 1950s

In contrast to some segments of both Reform and Charedi Jewry in America, the Modern Orthodox community welcomed the establishment of the State of Israel. But this positive attitude did not extend to any significant contemplation of aliyah. Israel was the haven for the refugees who survived the Holocaust, and later for the Jews forced out of Arabic countries. America, the leading world power and winner of the Second World War, was a land of opportunity for Jews. By European standards, antisemitism was minimal and a generation born in America dreamed of material and professional success.

With this background, I share my recollections of Yom HaAtzmaut during the 1950s. I attended a day school in which Jewish studies were taught in Hebrew (Ashkenazic pronunciation), then yeshiva for high school and college. I have no memory of any significant celebration in school. The Young Israel synagogue where we prayed was no different. Only because I went to Camp Moshava after ninth grade and joined Bnei Akiva did I experience Yom HaAtzmaut celebrations.

Before jet planes, there were no direct flights between America and Israel. Only a select few American students studied in Israel during that era. Students didn't receive college or *semicha* credit for learning in Israel. Going to Israel for a summer was unusual. Bnei Akiva was again the exception; going to Israel for a year of *hachshara* after graduating high school was normative.

Kol Dodi Dofek, a talk by Rabbi Soloveitchik at YU's Lamport Auditorium

that ideologically defined American Religious Zionism, was given on Yom HaAtzmaut in 1956. But it was delivered in Yiddish and not published at the time. Its initial influence was limited to those who heard it. Not many young people knew Yiddish. Those of us attending the Yeshiva Program at YU had to know some Yiddish since all the Talmud classes were conducted in Yiddish, but it was easier to follow a *shiur* based on a text written in a mix of Hebrew and Aramaic than to understand a talk fully in Yiddish.

The Hebrew translation first appeared in a volume entitled *Torah UMelucha* in 1961 and it later became recognized as a classic work in Israel and America. An English translation first appeared four decades later. Examining issues of the "Commentator," the Yeshiva College student newspaper of the time, I didn't find any mention of the talk. There was an editorial questioning the lack of any official program on Yom HaAtzmaut.

Bnei Akiva had a festive prayer service and a *chagiga*. At one, I was asked why I hadn't shaved, since I should treat it as a holiday. Uncomfortable with deciding on my own, I called Rav Moshe Feinstein, the leading *halachic* authority, from the event. I didn't ask Rav Soloveitchik because he permitted shaving during *Sefirah*. Rabbi Feinstein answered the phone himself (I was not even one of his students). He asked me if I considered it a holiday. When I replied yes, he said I could shave. I am not aware of any written version of this response.

The sixties was the beginning of a change which intensified after the Six-Day War. In retrospect, the major rabbinic figures understood the historic implications of the re-establishment of a Jewish State in Israel after almost 2,000 years, but this did not filter down to the broader Orthodox community. Except for a small minority, American Modern Orthodox Jews were so excited about the opportunities that America seemed to offer that even though they knew the establishment of the State of Israel was historically significant, they didn't consider it relevant to their lives.

With the passage of years and events, all this has changed. The Six-Day War led to a radical change. Graduates of America's yeshiva high schools started to spend a year of study in Israel; this trend expanded until it has become normative in recent years. This increased exposure to Israel is the source of greater identification and aliyah. May that trend continue to grow.

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