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## ISRAEL'S INDEPENDENCE DAY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY\*

Rabbi Yehuda Amital

**W**e, the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, have experienced many rough periods and the preceding period is certainly no exception. As we mark *Yom ha'Atzmaut* (Israel's Independence Day), the questions that arise are twofold.

First, has it all been worth it? Meaning, have the challenges we continue to face and the losses that we continue to suffer been worth the gains that we have made as an independent nation in our own land?

Second, assuming that we decide that the national and individual pain and suffering have been worthwhile due to their great significance, how do we allow ourselves to celebrate when these losses have been so great? Perhaps there is a difference between recognizing the value of our independence and the actual celebration of it despite its tremendous costs.

This essay will focus on these two questions, attempting to gain a greater understanding and appreciation of *Yom ha'Atzmaut*.

### I. THE VALUE OF ISRAEL'S INDEPENDENCE

On the 5th of *Iyar*, 5708 (May 14, 1948), a major shift occurred in the course of world history. This change can be appreciated on three different levels, namely: the Nation of Israel, the Land of Israel and the Eternity of Israel.

First of all, for the first time in two thousand years, a self-governing Jewish

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\* This address was originally delivered on the eve of *Yom ha'Atzmaut* 5743 (1983), following the Israeli military's heavy human losses during its invasion of Lebanon. Many *besder* students were among the casualties in this war, including a number of students from Yeshivat Har Etzion. Rav Amital's words are just as relevant in today's tumultuous times as they were when they were originally delivered. This piece has been adapted by Yonah Berman with Rav Amital's permission, from the transcript originally published in *Alon Shevut Bogrim*. Our thanks to Yisrael Wollman and David Greenberg for originally summarizing this speech.

country was established in—and as—the homeland of the Jewish people. *Am Yisrael*, to paraphrase Israel's Declaration of Independence, "has taken up its rightful place as a sovereign entity among the nations." The fact that a Jewish regime now governs almost half of the world's Jews is a clear step towards the Redemption. That Jews can be killed in a war in which they are fighting in a Jewish army, rather than at the mercy of anti-Semitic thugs, is something worthy of recognition, as it shows our rise to the status of a sovereign people in its own land.

On a second level, the Land of Israel is now in Jewish hands. We have not taken up statehood in Uganda or anywhere else, but rather the site of our former Temples and indeed, of the vast majority of Biblical history. Just as importantly, this land has become the refuge and aspiration for so many Jews around the world who recognize the value of Jewish independence in the Jewish State. We are no longer the subjects of the Turks or the British who happen to control *Eretz Yisrael*; we are, with God's help, the rulers of our land.

Third, we find a change in the fate of our People worldwide. Many people expected—if not outrightly wished—that the end of the Jews was near, and felt certain that the Holocaust would be one of the final nails in our national coffin. However, just the opposite occurred only three years after World War II ended, as the Jews—albeit scarred and decimated—assumed their place as an independent entity, rooted in its own soil.

The Jewish people of 1948 were thus transformed from a group which was often treated worse than animals through imprisonment, beatings and murders, to a nation that could be proud of its peoplehood, its country, and the accomplishments therein. This downtrodden people were quite similar to their ancestors who, upon leaving Egypt, were experiencing the first steps of redemption, *ge'ulah*.<sup>1</sup>

These three aspects of the current redemption all indicate a clear message from God to His nation: "For the first time in two thousand years, I am giving you the ability to control your own destiny. You, the Jews, are now responsible to make decisions of national importance with all of the ramifications that entails."

Clearly, there are many gifts from God which call for our gratitude towards Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, it is important to remember that Israel's Independence Day occurs between the holidays of *Pesah* and *Shavuot*. Clearly, it is a step in a process of redemption that also must involve *kabalat haTorah*. Yet, the reality of an incomplete redemption should act as a motivation for us to continue this process, rather than to impede our recognition of the miracles involved therein.

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 II. THE PROPRIETY OF CELEBRATION

Our tradition frowns upon the notion of *holelut*, “empty” celebration. However, celebrating on *Yom ha’Atzmaut* is far from empty, in any sense of the word.

Unfortunately, however, many people on both sides of the religious spectrum are unaware of the deeper values and reasons behind *Yom ha’Atzmaut*. Some have turned it into a celebration devoid of religious meaning, instead creating what could better be called “*Yom haBarbeque*” or “*Yom haTiyul*.” While there is certainly nothing wrong with hiking and other forms of recreation, this displays a lack of understanding of the depth and ramifications of Israel’s independence, and the reasons for celebrating it. On the other extreme, many individuals refuse to acknowledge the reality of the thriving State of Israel. For them, *Yom ha’Atzmaut* is a regular workday at best, and an opportunity to mourn the results of Zionism at worst.

In contrast to these two groups, the Religious Zionist community is called upon to appreciate this day’s significance from both religious and national standpoints.

Many years ago, there was an elderly European Hasid who worked in our yeshiva. He was not raised on the values of Zionism, yet danced with tremendous fervor on *Yom ha’Atzmaut*. He would say, “After what I went through in Warsaw, how can I **not** dance?”

This idea of spontaneous and noticeable celebration of the State is certainly easier for those who immigrated to Israel, or for those who have experienced the horrors that not having a Jewish State has caused over the years. However, even those who were born into a world in which the Jewish State was already a reality should be able to appreciate its significance and the importance of rejoicing over its existence, even if it takes a little more effort to do so.

One of the results of the destruction of European Jewry has been the loss of a culture with values and traditions. This multi-faceted society has been replaced by the more one-dimensional world-view of “*halakhah* only,” in which one questions not how to value and understand different phenomena within the larger world, but rather how to fit things into the framework of the Jewish legal system. Although this change has allowed for a flourishing and continuation of the Jewish People despite the fragmentation following the Holocaust, it has also limited a more holistic understanding of our tradition. We examine questions solely from a halakhic perspective, largely forgetting or ignoring their social and societal ramifications.

The attitude toward *Yom ha’Atzmaut* is a prime example of this phenomenon. Orthodox Jews find themselves asking if it is appropriate to make a blessing over *hallel*, rather than asking, “What is the long-term religious and social significance of the return of the Jewish People to their homeland?” These are not the questions that are discussed in the *Shulhan Arukh* and other books of Jewish law, yet they must be examined by Jews today.

Taking Judaism to a place that is inclusive of both Jewish law and Jewish thought regarding our national independence in our homeland is not easy, since it requires a certain paradigm shift away from two thousand years of exile, during which these questions were both painful and largely irrelevant. Nonetheless, we must rely on our instincts to dance when it seems obvious and appropriate to do so, and to appreciate the tremendous blessings bestowed upon us by God.

As we celebrate the gift that is the State of Israel, let us remember Ezekiel's prophecy:

For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all the countries, and will bring you into your own land

And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36:24 & 28)