

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells the story of Napoleon, once passing a synagogue on the somber day of Tisha B'Av, who was struck by sounds of crying and wailing emanating from inside the building. "What are the Jews mourning?" he asked one of his officers. "They are grieving for Jerusalem," came back the reply. "And how long ago did the Jews lose Jerusalem?" asked Napoleon. "More than 1700 years ago," the soldier answered. Napoleon was quiet for a moment and then said softly, "A people that remembers a place for so long will one day have it restored to them." And so, of course, it has come to pass in our time!

May 14, 1948 was one of the most joyful and important days in all of our nation's history precisely because of the sustained yearning for and dreams of return to Zion that have characterized the Jewish experience for the last 2,000 years. Every day in our prayers as we turned to face Jerusalem, every week in our Torah as we read of the land promised to our ancestors, every year at the seder when we concluded *l'shana haba'a b'Yerushalayim*, we kept the hope urgent and alive. "Those who sow in tears will reap in joy," proclaims Psalms 126:5, a line that we repeat on Shabbat in the opening paragraph of *Birkat HaMazon* (the Grace after Meals). After centuries of exile and dispersion, of taking up residence in places and amongst peoples more or less enamored by our presence, we have finally, at long last, come home.

On Thursday we celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, this year marking the 70th birthday of our nation's founding! Like so many happy occasions, it is difficult to put into words the tremendous pride and joyfulness associated with this milestone, one that feels particularly precious given the constantly imperiled nature of Israel's existence. Over the past seven decades Israel has developed from a tiny fledgling planted in barren desert and surrounded by hostile enemies to a strong, confident global leader in sustainable agriculture and technology. She has helped to protect and uphold democracy in the Middle East and is often on the front-lines in humanitarian crises, providing much-needed aid and support. Israel is our spiritual home and the home of our people, the one place where Judaism represents majority rather than minority culture and a perennial safe-haven should the wider world ever again become unfriendly. She is the place where our language, our traditions, our values, and our culture thrive!

In the Prayer for Israel that we recite every Shabbat, we talk about the modern-day State as being *reishit t'zmichat g'eulateinu* – the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. Read literally, these words are meant to be descriptive – they proclaim that with Israel's re-birth, our journey towards redemption has begun! Our *Siddur Sim Shalom*, however, understands this important phrase in more aspirational terms, translating "Bless the State of Israel *with its promise of redemption.*" Israel is the place where our highest hopes for justice, goodness, and peace have the greatest possibility of coming to full expression, even if we perhaps have not gotten there quite yet.

Birthdays are times to make wishes, and so we send our most heartfelt ones to Israel today. May she remain safe, strong, and vibrant. May she live up to her promise as a place of redemption for all peoples. And may she soon and forever more know a deep and lasting peace.

Happy 70th Israel – our hearts are joined in celebration with you!

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker