

The American Jew and State of Israel: Yom Haatzmaut 5783

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A few years ago, I went on a retreat to the mountains. Following the tragic death of my mother, it was a part of my mourning process—taking some time and space apart, to grieve and breathe in the tranquility that only nature can provide. I don't know why that is, by the way—that nature can make a person feel so *at home*, despite being *so far from home*. But that's how I felt for most of the trip.

On the last day, I treated myself to a spa visit for a massage. The massage therapist was particularly talkative. As you know, I can sometimes be a little, *more than a little*, talkative. So, we're being talkative, and she asks what I do.

"I teach."

"What do you teach?"

"Religion."

"Which religion?"

"Judaism."

"Oh wow... where?"

"I am actually a rabbi. I teach at a synagogue."

"Is that like a church for Jews?"

"Yeah, close. A rabbi is sort of a pastor, a teacher, a preacher...."

"Oh wow. That is so amazing. I just love the Jewish people," she says, as she's working out the cramps of my bum shoulder.

Then there's a little silence. Until she continues:

"They are so smart. I really admire the Jewish people. And Israel... is just, wow. I really want to go see the Holy Land. The only thing is... it's a shame what they're doing there.

Here we go. And by this point, she's working my neck. I'm thinking, "where's she going with this?"

“You know, what they’re putting into people’s bodies... changing DNA. I guess it’s because they are so smart...they know so much. But as a whole I love the Jewish people. I don’t understand why there’s so much fighting.”

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Suffice it to say that whatever sense of *home* I had felt from the land had vanished, and I had become... a Jew far from home. I could go on about how I responded, but I won’t – because many of us have had these types of experiences; especially our kids.

As we have learned and continue studying, antisemitism is spreading wildly, like a virus—invisible and often with little regard for political terms like “Right” and “Left.” Yet, what I discovered more soberly from this encounter with antisemitism was the degree to which the identity of the American Jew and the State of Israel are inextricable. In many contexts, to so many of our neighbors, *the Jew does represent Israel, and Israel does represent the Jew*, regardless of the individual American Jew’s attitude toward Israel.

And those attitudes, we know, are changing, rapidly. Two years ago, we learned from a PEW study that among American Jews, support for Israel (however respondents interpreted what that means) is in rapid decline.¹ 22% of Jews feel that “the U.S. is too supportive of Israel.” This doubles the 11% from 2013. Consider that for a moment: ten years is a remarkably short stint for “1 in 10” to become “1 in 5.”

That PEW study dropped one week before my retreat. So naturally on the ride home from the spa I thought about how this trend in declining support for Israel figured in the context of the experience I just had. I wondered how it figures into the “lived experiences” of everyday Jews. We don’t have surveys, to my knowledge, on how American Jews feel or respond when the entirety of the State of Israel is “transferred upon them.”

I mean that in subtle ways, too, like when a colleague who knows you’re Jewish out of the blue asks what you think about Israel. Perhaps you appreciated the question; they’re asking about a part of the Jewish story. Or

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-connections-with-and-attitudes-toward-israel/>

maybe you found it offensive, as if you represent Israel; like the State is your Jewish Homeland, even as you call this land your home.

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When I lived in Jerusalem, I felt that tension every day. Each day I would stroll through the park by my apartment on R'chov Jabotinsky. I recall on first walk through the park, feeling so lost. I passed a few Jews in kippot, sitting on benches, studying Talmud. I saw two teenage boys riding donkeys, laughing and telling jokes in Arabic.

I felt so foreign – until I came upon the purest image of home, for me: the Liberty Bell, a perfect, full-size, heavy-weight Liberty Bell, smackdab in the heart of that park in Jerusalem. Growing up outside Philly, I'd seen that bell hundreds of times, but only then did I get to touch that part of home... in Gan Hapaamon, Liberty Bell Park, in Jerusalem.

As you know, this Wednesday we observed Yom Haatzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, marking the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel. It's on Yom Haatzmaut each year that I return to the memory of Gan Hapaamon. I try to picture myself touching the Liberty Bell, with its famous crack that almost poetically captures the tension of being home, but not-quite-home.

However, this year I cannot imagine Gan Hapaamon. I cannot fathom what it'd be like to stand before that Liberty Bell. In recent months that park has been filled with protesters- as most parks have- outraged over the Netanyahu Administration's campaign to dismantle the Judiciary; with thousands of protests, involving millions of people *across the political spectrum*, from far Right to far Left. The Israeli citizenry is, by-and-large, terrified by this effort to make Israel an autocracy.

I can't imagine what it's like to stare at the Liberty Bell in Jerusalem, while just a few miles away sits the most extremist coalition government in Israel's 75 precious years; a government whose National Security Minister is Itamar Ben-Gvir, who heads a party called *Otzmah Yehudit*—"Jewish Power"; who glorifies Jewish terrorists like Baruch Goldstein; who has endorsed the

massacring of innocent Palestinians; who treats pogroms like parades, as he did in the wake of the Huwara pogrom two months ago.

Even as an American Jew, whose mind is boggled by our own disease of White Supremacy and White Nationalism threatening to strangle our government here, I can't imagine what it's like for a conscientious Israeli Jew to grapple with the threat of *Jewish* Supremacy in a State established with the democratic ideals promised in the Declaration of Independence signed 75 years ago.

I've never been able to fully imagine what it's like to be an Israeli, who faces the threat of terrorists every day, who offers their children to national service, wondering on any given day whether "my child's job" will be to keep us safe from terrorists targeting me at a cafe, or to advance an unjust occupation of Palestinian territories, with bulldozers or bullets. Or both.

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The Jew in America cannot experience the holiday of Yom Haatzmaut as a Jew in Israel can. And of course, no matter where we are, we're all different and we each speak from our own experiences— myself included.

I would characterize this Yom Haatzmaut as one of *Collective Cognitive Dissonance*, with two contradictory emotional responses. Cognitive Dissonance crying out from a singular devotion to the vision of a State of Israel that reflects the best of democratic and Jewish values.

One element, of course, in this cognitive dissonance is pride—immense pride over the establishment of the State of Israel 75 years and two days ago. The Jewish State is among the most significant achievements in world history. We are a people, who ages ago were exiled from our homeland, who for two-thousand years faced Jerusalem, three times a day, every day, to pray for a return to the place of its birth; and do so immediately following the worst genocide in human history, Jew-hatred of unimaginable proportions! Yes, we take pride in having a State to give promise to the words, "*never again.*"

And that's not the essential story of the Jewish State—it doesn't come close to capturing Israel's achievements over the last 75 years, to what Israel has gifted to world civilization and the human condition.

Many express our pride in small but endearing ways, too. Take the American Jewish baseball players who played for Israel in the World Baseball Classic. They're not Israeli, but they represented Israel. Why? Because they're Jewish! I watched those games, with pride. Beneath that pride was this sense, this whisper, that in some ways *the Jew does represent Israel, and that Israel does represent the Jew*.

However, that very statement—that “the Jew does represent Israel, and Israel does represent the Jew”—can take a toxic turn, when weaponized through antisemitism. Consider the two Jewish teens on Ocean Parkway in Brooklyn, when a mob surrounded them and demanded that they yell out, “Free Palestine,” before beating them to smithereens—with baseball bats. They were targeted only because, like it or not, to the masses, “the Jew does represent Israel, including its government, and Israel does represent the Jew.”

We know from the brightest and darkest moments of our past and present what Talmud teaches, that *kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh*, “all of the people of Israel are responsible for each other.”² How do we celebrate our rightful pride over Israel, without denying what can only be described, honestly, with the word “**shame**.” In our daily prayers we say, *lo leivosh l'olam va'ed*, we dream for world-to-come where we never feel shame! In this world, shame is a real, natural human emotion. We cannot deny it, but we can name it.

Shame and Pride. Our Collective Cognitive Dissonance. As psychologists know, the most common response to cognitive dissonance is to cling to one of the two contradictory attitudes or beliefs, and reject- even attack- the other.

Cognitive dissonance is not a foreign element within our tradition. It's for good reason that the Rabbis lifted up the value of *makhloket l'shem shamayim*—debate and conflicts that we hold for the sake of holiness. That is our lodestone—directing our minds and hearts and deeds toward Holiness.

² Tractate Shavuot 39a, Babylonian Talmud.

This week we begin the Holiness Code, chapters 18-26 of Leviticus. We read difficult mandates like that of *tochecha*, which is a caring expression of rebuke. It's a mitzvah. Calling out what is wrong among us is a must-do, for the sake of Holiness.

We will be reading the Holiness Code for a few weeks. At the end of it we'll bump into another mitzvah, one that holds its own cognitive dissonance—the tension between our world as it is—parched with brokenness—and the world we are commanded to pursue, as a Jewish people. This mitzvah is issued to an Israelite people who are not-yet-home, but homeward-bound. They are not yet in the Land, but dream of one day calling it home.

Leviticus 25 reads:

“ukratem d’ror baaretz l’chol yoshveihah—

And you shall proclaim Liberty throughout the Land for all of its inhabitants.”

These words were written long ago in the Land of Israel.
They are inscribed on the Liberty Bell.
It sits silently at home in Jerusalem, as it does at home here.
We pray that its words come true.
We pray for the way to make it so.

*Avinu Shebashayim, Tzur Yisrael v’Goalo,
bareich et M’dinat Yisrael...*

O Heavenly One, Protector and Redeemer of Israel,
bless the State of Israel,
which marks the dawning of hope for all who seek peace.
Shield it beneath the wings of Your love;
spread over it the canopy of Your peace;
send Your light and truth to all who lead and advise,
guiding them with Your good counsel.
Establish peace in the land and fullness of joy
for all who dwell there.
Amen.³

³ Mishkan T’fila, p. 377.