

## The Land Will Not Spit Us Out – Yom HaAtzmaut 5782

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This is a special week for the Jewish people. Thursday was Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Memorial Day; and next Thursday is Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel Independence Day, which makes this Shabbat the Shabbat between Destruction and Rebirth. At the beginning of the week, I concentrated on the opening words of the *parasha*: God spoke to Moses “*acharei mot*, after the death” of Aaron’s two sons, Nadab and Abihu. Like the deaths of the Six Million, the death of Aaron’s two sons defies easy explanation; it is shrouded in mystery and injustice. And as is the case with the Six Million, we respond to these inexplicable and tragic deaths by determining to begin again, to renew our commitments to God and Torah, and to live. Our people emerged from the Shoah to establish a powerful state, which promises to protect Jews against future tyrants.

Today I focus on the end of the portion, a warning about the responsibilities involved in settling and building that land.

But first, a story from the time I was in Israel on Yom HaAtzmaut. It was 22 years ago; but two things happened that stick with me.

The first was on the morning before Yom HaAtzmaut began. That day in Israel is Yom HaZikaron, Israel’s Memorial Day. At 10 am that day, air raid sirens go off throughout Israel and everyone stops what they are doing. People who are driving stop their cars and step out for a quiet moment of honor and respect. It happened on that day 22 years ago that I was in a taxi on the road from the airport to Jerusalem, which we were sharing with a group of Haredi 20-somethings who were studying at the anti-Zionist Mir Yeshiva. The driver pulled to the side of the road and asked us to get out. The yeshiva students declined. Instead, they made jokes about how it would be more appropriate to say Kaddish for the sin of establishing the state. I was in the back corner of the vehicle and unable to get out. I still remember the pain of that moment.

That evening, Sharon and I went downtown to celebrate Yom HaAtzmaut, and I remember being a little disappointed. I don’t know what I was expecting, but what I got was Silly String – total strangers walking around with cans of Silly String and spraying it on people’s heads. It felt like people had forgotten how to celebrate or why we celebrate Israel’s independence. At the time, I remember thinking that Israel had reached middle age. The pioneering spirit was gone. Israel was an established reality. And there was this sense of: what now?

Those experiences are on my mind as I hear the warning at the end of Parashat Acharei Mot. Be careful when you enter the land, the Torah says, that you not become a nation like everyone else. Do not defile yourselves in the ways of those who came before you. Follow My laws, keep My charge. *V’lo taki ha-aretz etkhem*, that the land should not spew you out as it did the other invaders who came before.

The Torah establishes an important principal. Settling the land, building a state, returning to Israel is a big responsibility. Israel is not like the other lands, the Midrash comments. Other lands are more stable. Regardless of what people do, the Rabbis imagine, Egypt will always have water from the Nile. Other nations can live carefree. But not Israel. Israel will always face existential challenges, whether from the inhospitable climate, the surrounding populations, or the social and economic challenges of building a modern state. And so, Israel's existence depends on us. Do not be complacent. Israel is counting on you. *V'lo taki ha-aretz etkhem*, Do not allow the land to evict you.

Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, famously said that "No state is handed to a people on a silver platter." This week, we remember the heroes who struggled and fought and persevered to establish the modern State of Israel. We give thanks for the miracle that our people did not just survive; we thrived. But it didn't just happen. And our work is not yet complete.

Israel's is a first-world capitalist economy, which, unfortunately, means there is a large gap between rich and poor. Israel has an impressive public health system that affords medical coverage for virtually every citizen; but there are gaps and inequities in the system, which have been exacerbated by Covid. The same can be said for Israel's public education system, which is divided between religious and secular and Haredi and Arab and so many other tracks that have very different ideas about the purpose of educational curricula and compete for funding in inequitable ways.

I've spoken before about the challenges of the religious system that officially sanctions only Orthodox Judaism. Earlier this year, the government announced it would no longer pursue implementation of the 2016 Kotel agreement that was supposed to establish a section for egalitarian prayer on par with the sections reserved for Orthodox prayer. And, of course, there are the ongoing challenges to the pursuit of peace with the Palestinians and Israel's other neighbors.

My point is not to bash Israel. Israel is far from the only country in the world to face real challenges. But Israel is ours. And Israel needs us. And there are ways to get involved in the areas that matter to us – whether by supporting Masorti in pursuit of religious pluralism; or groups like Leket Israel who fight food insecurity; or organizations like JNF or Arava that address environmental issues; or projects like Encounter or Students Supporting Israel, or one of the many organizations that advocate for Israel's security or promote peace. Israel needs us to dream.

And these are tough times for dreamers. After four rounds of elections in two years, Naftali Bennet established his diverse coalition on the premise that he would not get involved in big-ticket, controversial issues of war and peace. But the troubling terror attacks, the provocations and skirmishes, the loss of the governing coalition's majority – troubling developments just in the past month remind us that the status quo carries its own risks.

I understand why people want to stick with the status quo. When I asked my Israeli friends for their perspectives during our visit over Passover, I got short responses: The situation is bad. There are no partners for peace. The government is struggling. And let's change the subject. Because they want to move on. They just want to live their lives.

American Jews want to move on too. We take Israel for granted. We minimize the extent to which our Jewish identities here are intertwined with the fate of Israel. Of all the challenges facing our Jewish state, I fear the biggest one is apathy. I understand the sentiment; we just want to be normal. But Israel is not like other countries.

In another midrash, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century sage Rabbi Joshua ben Korcha asks: “וכי מי נברא בשביל מי?” Who was created for whom? Was the land created for the people or were the people created for the land?” When it comes to Israel, we were created for the land.

As we celebrate 74 years of Israeli independence this week, let us affirm our ongoing responsibility to sustain the Jewish homeland. We cannot treat Israel as just another country; we cannot neglect Israel as others may want to do. We must support Israel; we must observe God’s laws; we must do what we can to ensure that our land will not be defiled. ולא תקיא הארץ אתכם, The land will not spit us out. No! For we will engage and struggle and work until the prophetic dream is fulfilled: וישבתם לבטח ואין מחריד, You shall dwell in security and there will be nothing to fear. Shabbat shalom.