

Yom HaZikaron/ Yom HaAtzmaut 2005
Independence/Memorial Day 2005

Parashat Emor speaks of the festivals to be observed by the Jewish people. Earlier this week, the Jewish people around the world, but especially in Israel marked two holidays which are not mentioned in the Torah. They are modern, more recent additions to our calendar: Yom HaZikaron, Memorial Day, commemorating those who have fallen in defense of the State of Israel, and Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's Independence Day.

The two are linked together, as one day comes immediately after the other. The mood of the two days could not be more of a contrast. The first is somber and reflective, as just about every single Israeli has been directly touched by loss, and knows someone, or of someone, or has a direct relative who either died in defense of Israel, or as a result of a terrorist attack.

Yom HaAtzmaut, however, is a day of great celebration and is marked by picnics, parties and festivities.

We in America do not have anything like this, for our Memorial Day, which will be here in about 2 weeks is separated by several months from our Independence Day.

I thought about the difference between how our two nations mark these occasions as I attended an extremely moving ceremony put together by my wife, Symcha, marking Yom HaZikaron at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School earlier this week.

How difficult it must be for Israelis to move from the seriousness of one day to the frivolity of the next, and yet how very appropriate it is for the two days to be linked. What it teaches is that freedom and independence come at a cost. It reminds us that the creation of the modern Jewish state has come at tremendous sacrifice and loss of life, and this should never be forgotten or taken for granted. By placing the two days, one after the other, the message of how the two concepts are linked together is reinforced.

While it is difficult for non-Israelis to fully appreciate the significance of these two new holidays – after all, too many of us barely celebrate the ones that have been around for a few thousand years, we should strive to incorporate these days into our calendars as well.

What does it mean to have a modern Jewish homeland?

Writing in the Jerusalem Post, Barbara Sofer followed her pattern of last Yom Ha'Atzmaut when she came up with 56 reasons why she loves Israel. She followed up this year with 57 brand new reasons, some of which I have modified, and changed or deleted, so I share with you this morning about 40 of them.

1. At Jerusalem's Biblical Zoo the loudspeaker announces "Minha prayers are now being held near the lions."
2. The Biblical Zoo is kosher for Pessah. The primates eat matza, but the parrots get rice.
3. The nation mourns when a distinguished songwriter dies.
5. Thousands of free loan societies flourish. And you can borrow everything from wedding dresses to pacifiers.
6. Fourteen years after Operation Solomon, (the airlift which brought 14,000 black Jews from Ethiopia to Israel) the first plane's pilot still volunteers to teach Ethiopian youth.
7. When the tsunami struck, we sent medical assistance the very same day.
8. We also added flights to bring home our backpacking children.
10. The president of Israel spends Shabbat in a development town, and the first lady does the cooking.
11. A week before Yom Kippur, forecasters speculate on the weather for the fast.
12. Strangers still invite you for a home-cooked Shabbat meal.
14. Before Shabbat a siren marks our country hitting the brakes.
15. Municipal decorating contests feature succot decorations, not trees.
17. Volunteers pass out sandwiches at the hospitals, not for the patients, but for their families.
18. Childbirth and burial are free, and even the homeless have health insurance.
19. We have a Museum of Psalms, but at every bus stop someone is reading them, keeping the tradition alive.
20. Mrs. World is a Jewish Mother from Tel Aviv.
21. Stem cell research isn't controversial here
22. Fifty years after draining the swamps, we invented a one-pound aerial surveillance vehicle called the Mosquito.
23. Fifty years after we drained the swamps, we're considering bringing them back.

24. Desalinization is finally happening.
25. Per capita, Israel has the highest number of publications in the world in the Talmud...and in science.
28. You can hold an outdoor wedding any day during the summer, and not have to worry about what the weather will be.
30. Corner grocers know what type of hallah every family in their neighborhood eats on Shabbat.
31. At the corner grocery, you can often hear a discussion of the Torah portion.
32. We charge our food on a running account at the corner grocery, which is recorded on a little pad, but Israelis invented the check-out technology for America's largest supermarkets.
33. Everyone feels compelled to tell a parent to put a hat on the baby in a country where we wear scarves, wimples, fedoras, berets, tarbushes, kippot, streimels and keffiyot.
36. We invented both silent prayer and the chat room.
38. Even the fanciest cars fly blue and white flags.
39. Fabulous boutique kosher wineries are arising on the sites of ancient wine presses.

Here is one I of my own:

You can read a headline in one newspaper, "PA begins collecting arms from wanted militants" and on the same day, see another newspaper with a headline that says, "PA Has Not Disarmed Terrorists."

41. A Beduin kiosk in the middle of the desert stocks kosher-for-Pessah snacks.
42. Our ATM machines speak many languages.
43. Everyone knows where the secret intelligence offices are.
44. Combat soldiers aren't embarrassed to phone their moms.
45. Kindergarteners stand for memorial sirens, and know what they mean.
46. You can find someone to fix small appliances and alter clothing.
47. People mark their birthdays by the Jewish holidays they're closest to.

48. We're still an egalitarian society: When you go for a blood test, a Knesset member or Supreme Court justice might be in line with you.

49. In Jerusalem, the person offering tefillin shares space with the person selling red strings.

50. Take-out food is called "take-away" in Hebrew, and you can get kosher kubeh, sushi and tiramisu.

51. On Saturday night the radio summarizes news for all those who don't listen on Shabbat.

54. Throughout four years of war, we refused to give up essentials like outdoor book fairs.

55. After four years of war, we still feel safest here.

56. In this ancient land, there's always something new to love.

57. Here, "Shalom" means hello and goodbye. It can be a first name or a last name, but mainly it's our elusive dream and eternal prayer.

May that dream, eternal hope and prayer for peace, become a reality in the year to come.

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