

## 70 Years Young

Rabbi Yosef Weinstock

*Adopted from a sermon delivered on the Last Day of Pesach 5778*

In the Hagadah on Pesach we read:

**Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said: "Behold, I am like a seventy-year-old man,**

Tradition teaches that Rabbi Elazar was really much younger, but a miracle happened whereby he underwent a drastic change in appearance. This was for his benefit; so that his rabbinic colleagues would respect him in his new leadership position. The story of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya indicates something that Einstein would later mathematically prove: Time is relative. Age is just a number. Rabbi Elazar was “**KE**Ben Shivim Shanah”- **like** a 70 year old, when really his chronological age was something different.

I think about Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, especially this year as we prepare to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> birthday of the State of Israel. For in many ways, Israel, too, is like 70 years old. On the one hand the modern State of Israel is the culmination of a hope that had existed for over eighteen centuries- since the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. On the other hand 70 years seems like too short a time when we reflect on the tremendous accomplishments packed into those seven decades: absorbing millions of immigrants, developing and maintaining a vibrant democracy in a very challenging area of the world. At first Jaffa origins were Israel's biggest export. Today, it's high tech startups that are bought by companies like Apple. Jews around the world have much to celebrate, and much to be grateful for, on Israel's 70<sup>th</sup>.

Time is relative. Recent events can sometimes feel like they occurred a long time ago. And sometimes, events of the distant past remain vivid and relevant

In 1936, the Peel Commission questioned David Ben-Gurion, then head of the Jewish Agency, concerning Jewish rights to the Land of Israel. Ben-Gurion understood that the underlying question was: how can Zionists speak about a single homeland for all of world Jewry, after 2 thousand years of exile and dispersion? Is it really true that Jews of Russia and Jews of the Middle East and Jews of South America still constitute one nation? The following is an excerpt from his testimony:

'Three hundred years ago, a ship called the Mayflower set sail to the New World. On it were Englishmen unhappy with British society and government, who sought an uninhabited coast to settle and establish a new world. They landed in America, and were among the first pioneers and builders of that land.

'This was a great event in the history of England and America. But I would like to know: Is there a single Englishman who knows the exact date and hour of the Mayflower's launch? How much do American children — or grownups — know about this historic trip? Do they know how many people were in the boat? Their names? What they wore? What they ate? Their path of travel? What happened to them on the way? Where they landed? The name of their captain? The conditions of the sea during the journey?

'More than 3,000 years before the Mayflower set sail, the Jews left Egypt. Any Jewish child, whether in America or Russia, Yemen or Germany, knows that his forefathers left Egypt at dawn on the 15th of Nisan. What did they wear? Their belts were tied, and their staffs were in their hands. They ate matzot, and arrived at the Red Sea after seven days.

'He knows the path of their journey through the desert and the events of those forty years in the desert. They ate manna and slav birds and drank from Miriam's well. They arrived in Jordan facing Jericho. The child can even quote the family names from the Torah.

'Jews worldwide still eat matzah for seven days from the 15th of Nisan. They retell the story of the Exodus, concluding with the fervent wish, "Next Year in Jerusalem." This is the nature of the Jews.'

*(Quoted from 'The Jewish Case Before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine' (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 63, 65.)*

The Mayflower is history. Over time, the details of that story begin to fade from memory. The Exodus is OUR story. No amount of time distances us from the relevance and pride that we attach to the specifics of those events. The same is true concerning Medinat Yisrael. The Promised Land was the destination God had in mind all along when He promises to take us out of Egypt. Our task is to develop a personal relationship with Israel, and by doing so we will surely cherish her and

take pride in every one of her achievements. A strategy for developing that appreciation emerges from the two other Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya quotes in that paragraph from the Hagadah:

**“I could not win [the argument against the other sages] having the exodus from Egypt recited at night, until Ben Zoma derived it [from a Biblical source].”**

Rabbi Elazar learns from Ben Zoma that we recall the Exodus even at night. Halachically this means that the third paragraph of Shema (which references the Exodus) is recited at night also, and not just during the daytime. However the implications of Ben Zoma’s teaching goes much further. Even in the darkest moments of Jewish history Jews have found strength from the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim – the story of our nation’s founding and the moment when God chose us as His People. Just as recalling the Exodus is appropriate “at night”, so too recalling the dark chapters of Jewish history allow us to better appreciate the miracle of the State of Israel.

The justification for Medinat Yisrael is not the tragic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We know that the Jewish claim to Israel goes back to Creation, and at least 4000 years to God’s promise to Avraham. And yet we dare not be blind to the juxtaposition of the Holocaust followed by the establishment of Israel. Appreciating this flow of narrative makes us more grateful and more appreciative for Medinat Yisrael.

Lastly, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya quotes the teaching of the Chachamim:

**But the Sages say: "Days of your life" means the present world; "All the days of your life" includes also the era of Mashiach.**

Our relationship with Israel is not merely predicated on Jewish history, but on Jewish destiny as well. As Religious Zionists we believe that our story, individually and collectively, will be linked more and more with Israel in the future. The question we must ask is: what are we doing to inject Israel into our story, into our identity? Are we learning about Israel? Are we visiting Israel? Are we supporting Israeli causes? Are we including Israel more and more into our story? And are we seeking ways in which we can be included in Israel’s story?

So let us celebrate Israel’s birthday- 70 years young. As she reaches *KeBen Shivim Shanah*, it is an appropriate time to be grateful, to be joyful and to consider the

formative and transformative ways that Israel has been a part of our Jewish past, our Jewish present and our Jewish future.