

## Considering an Israel-less World

Tazria-Metzorah 2017

The Jewish Center

Rabbi Yosie Levine

Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of having lunch with Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. And when the conversation turned to the topic of anti-Semitism, he made a fascinating observation. “The mindset of the European Jew,” he said, “is totally different from that of the American. In the back of his mind, the European Jew always knows that in any given week, the day may come when he has to abandon his life in Europe and seek safety in the land of Israel.”

For so many Jews around the world, Yom Haatzmaut celebrates this aspect of Israel: The land of refuge – the safe haven of last resort should terror or violence make Jewish life untenable elsewhere.

And perhaps somewhere way at the back of our consciousness, we American Jews share this sentiment; but it’s certainly not top of mind. What, then, should be on our minds as we celebrate the anniversary of Israel’s independence? With the passage of 69 years – now that Israel has been so woven into the fabric of our Jewish vocabulary – how can we properly appreciate the value of Israel in our lives?

Of all the characters in the Torah, the one that seems to get the most disproportionate amount of attention is the Metzorah. We have chapters and chapters about his diagnosis and his treatment – the process by which he reintegrates into the community. And the question is why?

And I think Chazal answer the question when they tell us about the nature of sin writ large:

רוב בגזל, ומיעוט בעריות, והכל באבק לשון הרע

A lot people violate – in some form or fashion – the prohibition against theft;

A few people violate the prohibition against sexual misconduct.

But all of us are guilty of speaking לשון הרע.

The Torah spills so much ink on the Metzorah because the Metzorah is every man. It’s each of us. None of us goes through life without falling into the trap of misusing our words. These chapters aren’t some obscure relic of an ancient time. They’re a gift whose message is relevant to each and every one of us.

It’s with this premise in mind that I want to share an observation about this person we call the Metzorah and a part of the process by which he rehabilitates himself.

At the beginning of the second parsha we read this morning, the Torah tells us how the Kohen facilitates the Metzorah’s return. He takes two birds. The first is slaughtered; the second is set free.

ושלח את ציפור החיה על פני השדה.

And the question is why: Why two birds?

It's really quite anomalous. We don't find this anywhere else in the Torah. If someone is bringing a sacrifice to the temple, it's a sacrifice. Nobody brings a pair of oxen and then lets one go.

There's only one analog and that's the *שעיר לעזזאל* on Yom Kippur. But even in that case, the animal that's removed from the Temple is ultimately sent to his death.

So what does it mean for the Metzora's birds to be released into the field?

What I'd like to suggest is that the two birds are intended to symbolize the two paths that were open to the Metzora: One path leads to decay and demise; the other to liberty and life.

Before he can come back into the community of Israel, the Torah insists that he stops to consider the road not taken. What would have happened if instead of resorting to some debased comment at a dinner party, I chose instead to elevate the conversation? What would have happened if instead of piling on to a heap of insults, I chose instead to pivot away from all that negativity? What would have happened if instead of grumbling about all the things that were wrong with the evening, I chose instead to harp on everything that went right?

Here are two identical birds, the Torah says. Both paths are open because both fates are open. And so it is for all of us all of the time.

It's one of the most ancient and most profound means by which we can elevate our decision-making. Imagine if we really carved out the time to consider the counterfactuals in our lives – imagine if we created the space to think about what could have been had we only made a slightly different choice.

It's an exercise that throws into relief the consequences of the decisions we make all the time. It's not just the process of taking stock; it's much more sophisticated. It's the process of examining the significance of our decisions by actively comparing our reality to an alternate reality in which we've made an alternate decision.

And we don't have to wait until Yom Kippur. I think the Torah is telling us that – just like the Metzora – any of us can benefit from this process at any time. And it doesn't have to be unidirectional. It's not just about decisions we question or regret. It's also the way to deepen our appreciation for the choices about which we're proud.

There's a whole genre of books and movies that take up this project.

- What if Lincoln had never been assassinated?
- What if the Cuban Missile Crisis had escalated further?
- What if Einstein had never discovered relativity?

When it comes out of Hollywood, the product is fodder for fanciful entertainment. When it comes out of a desire for self-betterment, the product can be transformative.

And so as we prepare to celebrate Yom Haatzmaut this week, perhaps it's worth engaging for just a moment in the project of the Metzora – the project of holding up our reality and comparing it to what could have been:

What if we had no state of Israel? How would our world be different?

A number of answers come to mind:

- There would be no safe haven for Jews seeking asylum or fleeing persecution.
- There would be no visits to the Kotel or the Old City.
- There would be no renaissance of Torah learning and Jewish education.
- There would be no outpost for democracy and civil liberty in the Middle East.
- There would be no start-up nation leading the world of innovation.
- There would be no little children growing up speaking Hebrew.
- There would be no dot on the map that we couldn't point to and say, "That's the sovereign homeland of the Jewish people."

But I would encourage thinking about the question more personally, too. What would be different about our own lives if we lived in an Israel-less world? Many people in this room remember such a world. And so perhaps for them the wonder of Israel is wrapped up in its very existence. But for those of us born into a world in which Israel was already a state, something more is required.

To paraphrase the Ramban: They may be harder to notice, but the real miracles in this world are the ones we experience every day.

And so once a year is assuredly not too often to simply stop and marvel at the reality of a Jewish state called Israel – a Jewish state about which our forebears could only dream.