

Journey with me for a moment to the 5th of Iyar 5708, - 73 years ago today. Join me in Tel Aviv and enter a basement of a rather nondescript building on Rothchild Street. It's a building many of you know, Independence Hall. Listen to the words of David Ben-Gurion, as Shabbat approaches, with attack impending, from a clandestine location: the words crackle on Kol Yisrael - the Voice of Israel.

PLAY AUDIO CLIP ...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vy_LIKE9OMQ

Start at 0:48 End at 1:35

ERETZ-ISRAEL - the Land of Israel, was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.”

Even now I get chills listening to the recording. The longing of the Jewish soul for millennia has led to this moment. Not since the days of the Maccabees have the Jewish people governed their land, and it's been 1,878 years since the destruction of the Second Temple. Independence Hall -- bare and poignant – pulls on my heartstrings, everything I love about Zionism and Israel is encapsulated in this moment, the grainy audio, A picture of Theodore Herzl on the wall, the saying of She'heychianu, the singing of Ha'Tikvah.

This week, at Beth Am and around the globe, we celebrate Yom Ha-Atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. A chance to delight in the miracle of the modern state of Israel - 73 years old. Pause a moment to think about the United States 73 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. 1849. 300,000 seekers headed west toward California looking for prosperity in gold. Zachary Taylor was

inaugurated as the 12th President of the United States, Harriet Tubman escaped a slavery plantation near the Chesapeake Bay and started the Underground Rail Road. We had just concluded a nearly two year war with Mexico.

Some of you may remember that moment 73 years ago, our hearts were transported to Eretz Yisrael. After the horrors of Europe, the two thousand year old hope of the nation, *lihot am hofhshi, b'arzteinu* realized. Others, no doubt, have crafted their own connection with Israel over the years - teen trips or travels with Beth Am, visits to kibbutzim, associations with tech companies in Start Up Nation, a love of Israeli cinema or music or cookbooks. We continue to cultivate that relationship with Israel, individually and at Beth Am. Last week Rabbi Morrison outlined an exciting new partnership with a progressive community in the hills outside of Jerusalem.

Building a connection with the land of Israel is an essential commandment dating back to biblical times. Rashi, the 13th century French rabbi, comments on the book of Exodus: “We should not consider the land as part of an inheritance from the Patriarchs; rather we should consider the land as being directly given from God to each of us today.” תהא בעיניך כאלו נתנה לך בו ביום -- T'hei beinecha, keilu n'tanah l'cha bo b-yom

According to Rashi, Israel is not an inheritance - like an estate – which may be valuable, but not sacred. Rather, Rashi emphasizes that God gives the land to each of us at this very moment. It is incumbent on each of us to connect to the land, immediately today—b'yom. Abraham Ibn-Ezra echoes Rashi's reading of Exodus noting that the land was not given only to the ancestors but also given to every subsequent generation.

As Diaspora Jews this is often a difficult task - to feel that we are connected to this strange land far away. I know each year in our Introduction to Judaism class at Beth Am one of the biggest tensions - and it's a healthy tension - surrounds building a personal connection to Israel. It's a challenge - as a community we embrace the words of Ben-Gurion in the Declaration of Independence, believing that Israel is our life-blood, a sacred holy land.

Yet, we firmly believe that Diaspora Judaism is bold and vibrant and has much to offer the world. We know that most of our history has been outside of the land. We received the Torah outside of the land! As a people we've used text and festivals and Shabbat to enable us to survive for millennia in exile. We believe "am yisrael - the people of Israel -" exists without a nation state and we know that strong Diaspora Jewry is good for the Jews. Many of us can imagine no place safer to prosper and thrive than the United States.

We are at once Zionist affirming and Diaspora affirming. Israel and Galut.

For those new to Judaism or to Jewish life, or for many in a younger generation - who have no memory of the Six Day War or of Peace with Egypt and Jordan or of Yitzhak Rabin - building that connection is even more challenging. Most of the Israelis we know - grew up in America. We know our Jewish practice is more accepted here than in Israel. I know many Jews of younger generation who say: "The issue is just too muddled and difficult, emotions flare-up, I'm torn in multiple directions, I'll never know enough, I do not want to subject myself to attack, other people are more passionate and loud than I am ... so I'm sitting out Israel. I'm not proud of that fact, but I am." This is especially true on college campuses where a few loud voices often dominate the conversation and room for personal questioning, hesitation and searching is not present.

We need to say, it's okay to love Israel and feel confused or frustrated by Israel at the exact same time. It's healthy to ask tough questions about peace and politics. It's okay to be skeptical of the Israeli Government - and be deeply concerned about Israeli democracy - four elections in two years cannot be a good thing! As Jews, we must face up to the internal problems within Israeli society, and the ugliness that sometimes characterizes Israeli behavior – racism directed at Israeli Arabs and other minority groups, economic inequities, hostility towards women and religious intolerance. We should be appalled by radical settlers who seek to wreak havoc and undermine the Army, the Government and democracy. Most importantly, our hearts should break at the decades-long suffering of innocent Palestinians who live under brutal occupation and the pain, loss and humiliation they endure.

A willingness to deeply engage and to be honest about the Israel we love is an essential part of maintaining that bond between Israel and the Diaspora. The more we approach Israel from varied angles, the richer our engagement with Israel becomes and enhances the un-severable link between the Jewish people and the land of Israel. In the words of Lisa Grant and Ezra Kopelwitz: “Struggling with Israel is not a middle of the road compromise- it is a spark-flying technicolor ongoing interchange of ideas and passion.”

But it's Israeli Independence day - and I'd be remiss to not share my connection to Israel. I took my first trip to Israel with NFTY after my 10th grade Confirmation class. After high school, I lived in Karmiel, a development town in the Galilee, working with Ethiopian Immigrants. I volunteered at Kibbutz Yahel, the Reform Movement's charter Kibbutz, working with drip-irrigation systems in the Pomello fields on the Jordan/Israel border. Since then, I've staffed two Birthright trips, and taken part in a Christian/Jewish Seminary Student Pilgrimage. I spent a year living in Jerusalem as a first year rabbinical student and a summer in Tel Aviv taking Hebrew classes and strolling on the beach. Two Years ago, as a rabbi for Beth Am, I led a Honeymoon Israel Trip

of 20 Bay Area couples to Israel over Hanukkah. I plan on doing so again post-pandemic.

I love the country. I love the shvil yisrael - Israel's Appalachian Trail that goes from the Lebanon Border to the Red Sea, spanning 600 miles of changing terrain. I love Hapoel Jerusalem -- my favorite Israeli basketball team -- always finishing second to perennial powerhouse Maccabi Tel-Aviv. I love Shtisel and Shakshuka. I love Friday afternoon in the Old City of Jerusalem as Christian pilgrims and Jews preparing for Shabbat mix with the Muslim call to prayer. I love the fresh water oasis of Ein Gedi, right above the Dead Sea where thousands of years ago, the biblical David took refuge from King Saul. I love Tu B'shvat in Israel when - *haskedia porachat* - the first blossoms of the almond trees appear throughout the land. I love the pears and grapefruits in the market, the Hebrew and Arabic of the street signs, the lively blend of secular and religious culture, the oceans and the forests, the metropolitan Tel Aviv and the remote desert kibbutzim.

The Israel I love has nothing to do with the political analysis of the media - if you want that, you know where to get it. I know the country I love has flaws and warts - but it's mine, it's ours, and it's an essential part of us as Jews. I know we have different visions of Israel, different visions of how to bring peace and what the Jewish State should be. If you're hesitant or ambivalent - no problem, I want you too to engage too. Questions, discomfort, a quest to learn more, these are good qualities in the Jewish spirit and the Israel conversation.

One of the founders of the Reform Movement, a man who both loved the ideal of Jewish Homeland and understood the importance and centrality of Diaspora Judaism, Rabbi Stephen Wise wrote about a pre-1948 trip to Israel - it was then called Palestine: "Nowhere in

Palestine did I find a moment's forgetfulness of the centrality and primary truth, that the business of dwellers in and restorers of Palestine was to build a future, to make that future conform to the best in the Jewish past and create a new best and new nobleness in the Jewish future.”

Let that continue to be our calling! 73 years young! Yom
Ha-Atzmaut Sameach