Israel at 75
April 28, 2023

"The Eternal said to Avram, '*Lech l'cha*, go forth from your land, from the place of your birth, from your father's house, to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, And I will bless you; I will make your name great, And you shall be a blessing'...Avram went forth as the Eternal had commanded him…. Avram was seventy-five years old when he left Charan" (Gen. 12:1-4). So begins the story of the Jewish People, starting with this covenant between God and Abraham, the Land of Canaan as its linchpin. At 75 years old, instead of relaxing and enjoying his retirement years, Abraham embarks on a new and perilous journey. At 75 years old, he is just beginning to fulfill his life's purpose.

This week, we celebrate another 75-year old, the modern State of Israel. Some of us aren't old enough to remember that day in 1948, but many of us have heard the recording of that thrilling moment when David Ben-Gurion announces (in Hebrew, of course), "ACCORDINGLY WE, MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ERETZ-ISRAEL AND OF THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT, ARE HERE ASSEMBLED ON THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE OVER ERETZ-ISRAEL AND, BY VIRTUE OF OUR NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT AND ON THE STRENGTH OF THE RESOLUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL."[1]

[1] https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/about/pages/declaration.aspx

It is a thrilling pronouncement, to be sure, but the best part of the Declaration comes two paragraphs later, when Ben-Gurion describes this new nation: “THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”

If only. For 75 years, Israel has striven to realize the aspirations of its founders, to live up to the values that its Declaration of Independence espouses. It certainly has fulfilled its first purpose, to be open for Jewish immigration. In 1948, the population was 800,000. Today, it is 9.7 million, including 7.1 million Jews. In many ways, it has become a flourishing, innovative, modern country. But it has also fought wars for its survival, endured two intifadas, and maintained an occupying presence in the Palestinian territories for over 50 years. The “freedom, justice, and peace” that the founders hoped for has not yet come to be. Right now, Israel in the middle of an unprecedented time of political division and upheaval, with many Israelis and diaspora Jews worried that the democratic character of Israel is seriously threatened.

While age 75 was a turning point in Abraham’s life, it has also been a perilous time in the history of Jewish sovereignty. According to Drs. Mijal Bitton and Masua Sagiv, “Historians and educators have pointed out a critically important pattern in the history of Jewish self-rule. There are two pre-modern eras in which the Jewish nation

enjoyed sovereignty in the land of Israel: at the end of the 11th century BCE with the Davidic Kingdom and the first Temple in Jerusalem, and in 140 BCE when the Hasmonean dynasty reestablished Jewish independence in Judea. But as each approached their 75th year of existence, each started to disintegrate because of internal strife and infighting. The Davidic reign over a united Israel effectively ended when it was split into the two competing kingdoms of Judea and Israel. The Hasmonean kingdom began to fall apart due to infighting between the sons of Alexander and Shlomtzion, the rulers of Judea in the first century BCE. Sovereign Jewish history tells us that at around the 75th year, experiments in Jewish self-determination faced the most dangerous threat of all: self-destruction."[2] Sagiv and Bitton go on to urge our generation to defy this pattern in Jewish history, saying, "The generations before us proved that we can rewrite diasporic history, turning a tale of vulnerability and weakness into one of strength and power. Our generation and those that follow must likewise defy sovereign Jewish history and prove that we can protect our Jewish state from the internal threats it faces. Our generation's task is to overcome our divisions and not let fraternal hatred destroy our shared home."

If Sagiv and Masua are right, then Israel's existence as an independent nation might very well be at stake. But its character as a Jewish and democratic state is equally in danger, if not moreso. As Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes with stinging clarity, "This anniversary comes at an inflection point for the country's democracy. What happens this year will determine whether Israel has a chance at living up to the values enshrined in its declaration of independence, or whether it becomes a fascist theocracy that codifies

[2] https://www.jta.org/2023/04/24/opinion/multiple-efforts-in-jewish-sovereignty-have-self-destructed-after-75-years-can-israel-defy-history-again

discrimination against women, LGBTQ people, Palestinian citizens and other minorities and that permanently occupies another people."[3] The thousands of Israelis who have been protesting against the government every week for months demonstrate that those who hold on to a vision for an Israel that embodies its founding principles won't go down without a fight. As we have spoken about from this bima before, American Jews can stand in solidarity with our Israeli brethren in the fight for Israel's soul.

So happy 75th birthday, Israel. We celebrate the miracle of your existence: the Zionists who dared to dream, the brave pioneers who made your desert bloom, the Jewish lives that you have protected and enriched, and the hope, in spite of everything, that we still have for you. Happy birthday, Israel. Now it's time to grow up.

[3]https://www.jta.org/2023/04/21/opinion/as-israel-turns-75-we-should-celebrate-by-fighting-for-it-to-live-up-to-its-ideals