

Erev RH 5784 - In Honor of Israel's 75th
September 15, 2023

Rabbi Heath Watenmaker

Seventy-five years ago this past May, just before Shabbat began on May 14, 1948, and hours before the British Mandate in Palestine came to an end, David Ben Gurion, then the chairman of the Jewish People's Council, who later became the first Prime Minister of Israel, stood before the assembly of the Council gathered at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, and broadcast live on the airwaves of the new Kol Yisrael radio station, to declare the independence of the modern state of Israel.

In honor of Israel's 75th birthday, and this complicated moment in her history, the clergy thought we'd spend some time taking a close look at the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, which served then and continues to serve as the aspirational document upon which the government of the modern State of Israel is based. First, here's a taste of that moment, from May 14, 1948...[[AUDIO CLIP]]¹

You can hear David Ben Gurion's Hebrew, tinged with the remnants of his Polish accent, even after over forty years in British Palestine, and the formal Hebrew used here is a reminder of just how young modern Hebrew was in 1948, still pulling heavily from the language of the prayer book.

Be-eretz Yisrael, kam ha-am ha'yehudi.

ERETZ-YISRAEL, 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.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.²

The text begins with our beginnings, as a people with a unique identity, that was forged out of the unique way we understood our relationship with the world beyond us, represented by God; the land in which we lived, Israel; and the rules of engaging with this place and this world, the Torah. This place, Israel, was the place where we developed, nurtured, explored, and expanded our understanding of ourselves as a people. Where we trace our spiritual beginnings and a symbol of the promise made between God and Abraham, when God called him to *lech lecha* - go forth to a land that I will show you.

¹ <https://youtu.be/E06YHS3vVqA> - Play from 1:49 to 2:30

² Translation from Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs at <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/general/declaration-of-establishment-state-of-israel>

For 2,000 years, following the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, Israel became embedded in the Jewish psyche as the symbol and focal point of our highest aspirations: not only a longing for a return to the physical land, carrying with us the memory of Jewish sovereignty and self-determination, but an eternal yearning for the hope of peace and redemption of the messianic age, symbolized by a return to Israel. Israel isn't just a place in the Jewish mind, it is a way of being, a state of mind, a reminder that we are a people committed to hope, with an abiding faith that God will not forget about us and will bring us back to our Promised Land.

In the Psalms, we read, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither."³ At the end of our Passover Seder, we sing *L'shanah Haba-ah b'Yerushalayim*, Next Year in Jerusalem. And every time a Jew prays, we face east, focusing our hearts and minds towards Jerusalem.

The opening lines of Israel's Declaration of Independence capture both the deep Jewish historical ties to this land, but more than that, they capture the ages-old spiritual longing embodied by the land of Israel. But what they don't resolve is the tension between Eretz Yisrael - that is, the biblical notion of the Land of Israel as a symbol of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and Medinat Yisrael, the modern State of Israel and her government. At the center of the modern State of Israel is also an ancient tension with the historic, spiritual Land of Israel, and the constant push and pull of that longing hope and the challenges of daily life in a modern, complex country. But again and again, we come back to hope. As we sing in Hatikvah, Israel's national anthem:

*Od lo avdah tikvateinu,
Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim,
Lihyot am chofshi b'artzeinu
B'eretz Tzion v'Yerushalayim.*
Our hope is not yet lost –
The hope of 2,000 years:
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

³ Psalm 137:5

Rabbi Sarah Weissman

The Sanctuary of the Jewish People

The Declaration continues: “In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.”

Theodor Herzl was an Austro-Hungarian journalist and political activist. He witnessed growing anti-semitism in Europe during the late 19th century and asserted, “Antisemitism has grown and continues to grow – and so do I.”⁴ He concluded that the only solution was to found a Jewish state, a safe haven for Jews.

Less than fifty years later, Herzl was proven tragically prescient, as millions of European Jews had nowhere to go to escape the Nazis. Countries including the United States stood by, offering words of sympathy for the plight of the Jews while keeping their borders shut, or almost shut, to Jewish refugees. That’s why Israel’s Declaration of Independence affirms that “[t]he catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people - the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe - was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew....” Israel was founded to be a sanctuary for the Jewish People, a place where Jews can count on finding safety, dignity, and freedom. Since the founding of the State, millions of Jews – from Europe, from Middle Eastern countries, from the Soviet Union, from Ethiopia – have made use of that sanctuary, escaping persecution and making their home in their historic homeland.

And for the past 75 years, many more of the world’s Jews, while not making aliyah themselves, have been comforted by the fact that Israel is there for us. Antisemitism, as Herzl said over a hundred years ago, continues to grow. We at Beth Am know this to be true. If, God forbid, antisemitism makes it too dangerous to stay where we are, Israel has always been our escape plan. But ask yourselves, and then ask other American and Diaspora Jews today, whether you would consider moving to Israel. Do you, as a non-Orthodox Jew, you as a woman, or a person of color, or a member of the LGBTQ community, do you see Israel as a place where you can live in safety, dignity, and freedom? Many of us would say no, or at least, I’m not sure. It’s not enough to be a place open to the immigration of all Jews. To be our sanctuary means that Israel is a place where we can not only live, but where we can make a life, free from physical danger and persecution, and also free from the spiritual dangers of occupation and tyranny. Only when all of its inhabitants can thrive will Israel fulfill the promise of its founders, to be the safe haven and true home of the Jewish People. I pray we soon see the day when that promise is fulfilled.

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www.jewishjournal.com/commentary/opinion/351500/the-dreyfus-pivot-herzl-confronts-jew-hatred-on-the-march/

Cantor Jaime Shpall

I visited Israel for the first time on a group trip when I was 16. The first Friday afternoon of the trip I had some free time before Shabbat so I walked up the street to buy a falafel. The woman working at the falafel stand put everything together, in a rush she handed me my sandwich and then did something that blew my mind: she said, "Shabbat Shalom".

In that one moment I understood what it meant to really feel at home.

I've been back to Israel countless times since then and I always marvel at that feeling of belonging. Even amidst all of the traffic, the honking horns and the arguing, I feel somehow lighter. I know I have a place, I am accepted and I belong.

So, I keep going back. I've fallen in love with the Hebrew language, her poetry, music and dances. With the food, the art and the people. With each trip I broaden my awareness and see different facets of the complex enterprise we call Israel, the good and the bad. Yet each time I return, I feel that same sense of homecoming.

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On this eve of the new year, the rabbis and I are recalling sections of the Israeli Declaration of Independence. The next section states:

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.

What a profoundly hopeful, and idealistic statement they make at the founding of this nation. Is it realistic? Is it even possible?

I spend a lot of my time at Beth Am working with b'nei mitzvah kids, and I have a spiel that I use to teach the kids and their parents about their tzedakah project. (So apologies if you have heard this before). I hold up a snow globe that I have on my desk and I tell the kids that when we are very young our parents present us with a perfect view of the world, one that resembles this snow globe. And that's how it is for us as really young kids.

So, The rabbis of old noticed something wonderful happening to a person your age. The vision of a perfect world that our parents create for us begins to fade, and the truth of the world comes into focus. We begin to see the brokenness, and the cracks. And, along with this new world view a fire develops inside of us that moves us to want to do something about it! That inner fire to take part in fixing the world is what we celebrate when you become a bat mitzvah! And we hope

that performing acts of tzedakah will be central to who you are as a person and as a Jewish adult.

This teaching can be extended to describe our understanding of Israel. Many of us see Israel as a snow globe, perfect, and unblemished. But as we engage more, the cracks and brokenness begin to show themselves. Indeed, Israel today is broken in so many ways, and her democracy itself is hanging by a thread. But we should not be discouraged by recognizing Israel's cracks. We should be hopeful! We should be proud of the fire inside of us that leads us to be part of the solution - to fix the brokenness.

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From the declaration of independence again: The state of Israel will be based on freedom, justice and peace. it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants, irrespective of religion, race or sex.

This is the Israel that I love. An Israel that upholds democracy and equality and upholds our Jewish values. I believe that this Israel still exists even as it becomes obscured by the government's desire to abandon Israel's democracy through weakening the supreme court. I am not alone in that belief: Since January, hundreds of thousands of protesters have joined together in the streets of Israel waving Israeli flags, fighting for democracy. They haven't stopped. It's been over 8 months and the protests continue.

We know that this Israel exists. All it takes is one visit and you will see proof of it in the cultural diversity, hospitality, ingenuity and bravery of her people.

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, addressing the K'nesset this year, referred to the poem "In the Old City" by Yehuda Amichai. In it, he says that as a people we are *negu'ay tikvah* (infected with hope). Jacobs continues:

Indeed, we have a sense that there is some better way for us to be. We are not naïve by being hopeful. Rather, hope is a commitment that the world as we see it and as we live in it is not the only one. It is a world we can shape -- for the Jewish people, for the Jewish state, and for all the world.

We are *negu'ay tikvah*. Infected with HOPE

Let us not be silent. Let us not be inactive. Let us not let the wheels of this government roll over the Jewish people

We have a role. We have a responsibility. Let us do the right thing.

May this be a year of deeper engagement with Israel for all of us. May we continue to strive for the Eretz Yisrael that is described in this founding document. An Israel where all the inhabitants can live in freedom and peace.

L'shanah Tova Tikateivu, I wish you a happy, healthy and sweet new year.

Rabbi Jonathan Prosnit

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

The final appeal of the Declaration of Independence focuses on Diaspora Jews, living far from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv. 75 years later, it's actually pointed right at us. Building a personal connection with the land of Israel, for Jews living outside of the land, is a commandment dating back to biblical times. Rashi, the medieval French commentator, 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." (To Exodus 13)

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 individual to connect to the land ... today.

As Diaspora Jews this is a difficult task - to feel that we are connected to this strange land far away. Connected to a place that doesn't always uphold our values - in its treatment of Palestinians, LGBTQ citizens or Reform Jews - yet knowing that we still have the responsibility to connect. It's a challenge to embrace the words of Ben-Gurion believing that Israel is our life-blood, our inheritance, yet firmly maintaining that Diaspora Judaism is bold and vibrant and has much to offer the world.

We know that most of Jewish 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 diaspora Jews! We love Israel!

So what do we do? Because, I worry about American Jews and their connection to Israel. I worry about alienation from the land of Israel and the broader idea of Jewish peoplehood - the notion that all Jews are obligated to one another despite our many differences. I worry that the understandable reaction to this horrible government and to cruel occupation, too easily shifts to detachment and indifference to the Jewish homeland.

The Israel I love has nothing to do with political analysis or the media. I know the country I love has major flaws and warts, the last few months have been extremely difficult for me - 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 to engage too. Questions, discomfort, a quest to learn more, these are good qualities in the Jewish spirit and the Israel conversation.

But here's the message this Rosh HaShanah. Care! The Jewish People need you! For those of you who are not Jewish, or have converted to Judaism in recent years, or feel you are on the periphery of Israel engagement - we especially need you to engage with Israel too. Please don't feel intimidated by others who might read more articles or have visited more recently or who might shout louder. Israel is yours too, given to you as part of your connection to the people, claim it. Upset with the current state of Israel - don't walk away, we need you more than ever.

There are many different ways: Give to Israeli Organizations that reflect your values. Maybe IRAC - the Israeli Religious Action Center who fights for religious freedom and pluralism in Israel, we're supporting them and the Israeli Reform Movement as our Tzedakah box. Or the Jerusalem Open House - one of the leading LGBT rights groups in Israel.

Take a Hebrew Class. Watch an Israeli Movie. Read a book. Cook an Israeli Dish. Attend one of the rallies protesting this current government. I've been to many and it's always great to run into Beth Am members.

Visit. There is no better way to truly feel that connection than to go. I strongly believe that every Jew needs to visit Israel at least once in his or her life. This year we are sponsoring two Israel trips. One in the spring for adults and one in July specifically for families. Sign up. Meet new people. Engage in the sacred act of being in the land of Israel. There is nothing more formative in shaping one's own Jewish identity than spending time in Israel.

75 Years of Israel. What an accomplishment. Let's see this country as part of our inheritance. The words Israel means - God wrestlers - Welcome to our season of wrestling! Care! Engage! Visit! For the sake of our community, for the sake of our souls and for the sake of Jerusalem.