

Tazria/Yom Ha Atzmaut 2018

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 4/21/18

This week marked the end of what has come to be known as "Israel's High Holidays." Of course I don't mean Rosh Ha-Shannah and Yom Kippur, but rather the week of holidays encompassing Yom Ha-Shoah (Holocaust Memorial Day), Yom Ha-Zikaron (Israel's Memorial Day for Fallen Soldiers), and Yom Ha-Atzmaut (Israel Independence Day). These holidays, coming so close together, present a narrative of the history of the modern State of Israel.

Yom Ha-Shoah has taken on new meaning in Israel in recent years. It used to be that Israelis looked at Israel as the antidote to the Holocaust. The Jewish People in Israel would not be like the Jews of Europe. The days of going like lambs to the slaughter were behind us. Israel would be a strong and very powerful People, able to defend itself against all enemies. The past, with all its suffering and death, were behind us. There would be no looking back. Therefore, European sounding last names were changed to Hebrew ones that meant the same, or at least sounded similar. Yiddish first names were a thing of the past, too. But in recent years things have changed. A large number of religious Jews in Israel do look back at European Jewry fondly. They are Israel's spiritual roots, too. And secular Jews in Israel understand that Zionism was born in Europe. Without the influence of those who perished there might not be a Jewish State. So now, in our own day, the first stage of celebrating Israel's independence is remembering those who were killed longing to be able to live freely as Jews.

Then, six days after Yom Ha-Shoah comes Yom Ha-Zikaron, which means literally "Memorial Day." I think that it is impossible for Americans, including American Jews, to fully appreciate what Yom Ha-Zikaron means to Israelis. Never mind that Memorial Day here in The States has become a day of picnics and the kick-off to the summer season. Even for those who take the meaning of American Memorial Day seriously, it is about remembering those who died in military service, the people who helped us to remain a free country; men and women who fought for American interests abroad. But who among us can name three individuals who died defending the United States of America in the last 10 years? Well, in Israel there is NO ONE who cannot name three people who died defending the Jewish State in the same time period. NO ONE. Even if it was not your brother, sister, or one of your parents or kids, EVERYONE knows lots of people whose family has suffered that pain. Yom Ha-Zikaron, Israel's Memorial Day, is intensely personal in ways we American Jews can never fully comprehend. In Israel, Memorial Day is not about remembering fallen soldiers, it is about mourning, full out mourning family and friends who died not somewhere far away, but right nearby.

And then, coming right on the heels of Yom Ha-Zikaron, of the Memorial Day, is Yom Ha-Atzmaut. Israel's Independence Day. They flow one directly into the other so as to say, in a deep and personal way, you cannot have one without the other; you cannot fully understand and fully process emotionally Yom Ha-Atzmaut without seeing it in the context of BOTH Yom Ha-Shoah and Yom Ha-Zikaron. That's what the "Israeli High Holidays" are all about. Just as we emerge from Yom Kippur with a renewed sense of hope, having confronted our sadness and loss only to begin again, so do our brothers and sisters in Israel. That's what the Israeli High Holidays are all about.

I thought about Israel as I was reviewing this week's Torah portion, too. Rambam, the famous Jewish philosopher of the 11th century, explained that the rituals we read about in Leviticus, including all the stuff we discussed today, are all designed to keep a person from taking his or her spiritual life for granted. Rambam said that people would start to take the Temple for granted after it had been there for a while. People would feel free to come and go as they pleased thinking that it was always there and will always be there. But by reminding people that only the ritually pure could come to the Temple, the Torah was forcing folks to take a look at their lives, both physically, like with the skin rashes, and spiritually, on the inside, too. You could not take the Temple, and your attendance there for granted.

And this made me think about Israel at 70. 70 years is a long time to some people. In fact, most Jewish people were born when there already was a Jewish State. Anyone who has the funds and the desire to do so, can buy a plane ticket and land safe and sound in Israel tomorrow, then take a bus and be at the walls of the Temple in Jerusalem in less than 24 hours. Amazing! Can you imagine your ancestors and mine in Europe thinking that such miracles could ever come true? But they have and we cannot ever afford to take Israel for granted.

That's why Israel Bonds are so important, and I emphasize this now, not only in honor of Israel's 70th birthday, but because you, the members of Beth El will soon be receiving a card for purchasing Israel Bonds that will be sent directly from Beth El to your home. You know, it's one thing to say, "I am not happy with this or that policy or political figure in Israel, so I'm not wild about giving them money." But it is quite another to say, "I'm happy to LEND Israel money while they figure things out." And that's what Israel Bonds are, a loan to Israel that is paid back with guaranteed interest. Are you willing to lend State of Israel money so it can remain strong, proud and free? I am!

An investment in Israel Bonds declares your support for and appreciation of the ideals and values of the State of Israel - democracy, pluralism, tolerance, safety, and putting human creativity and ingenuity to work to make the world a cleaner, safer, healthier, better place. So when the envelope comes, please don't set it aside. Israel Bonds can be purchased for as little as \$36.

We only have one Jewish State, and it only turns 70 once. On the Thursday of Yom Ha-Atzmaut, we had a program and parade for our Early Childhood Center kids. It was great! And later that day, as a three year old was walking with his parent out of the building I heard him sing, "Happy Birthday dear Israel, Happy Birthday to you..." It really is up to all of us to assure that Israel has many, many happy birthdays in the decades to come. We must support the Jewish State and move the dream that is Israel into an even brighter future.