

The Meaning of Yom Ha'atzmaut

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We are about to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut – Israel Independence Day. This day is the climax of the efforts made by recent generations to free the Jewish people from the tribulations they suffered in the lands of the Gentiles. It is clear that the day on which we merited the founding of the State of Israel in the Land of Israel, on which we escaped the subjugation of other nations and were given the opportunity to run our lives as we see fit in the Land of Israel, should be a day of great thanksgiving to the Master of the World.

But there is much more to Yom Ha'atzmaut! It is not only a day to give thanks; it is a day of profound faith. G-d promised to bring us back from exile but we spent almost 2,000 years in exile! Beaten, depleted and persecuted, we went through pogroms, an inquisition and a horrific Holocaust. The exile was a terrible desecration of G-d's name. As the Prophet said: "And they desecrated My holy name among the nations to which they came, where they said of them: These are the people of the Lord and they have left His land!" The Gentiles who saw the Jews said: "If the people of G-d are in such dire straits and G-d is offering them no salvation, 'where is their G-d'?"

But then a great miracle occurred! The Jewish State was established and the Jewish people gathered from the four corners of the Earth! Millions of Jews – Moroccans and Yemenites, Ethiopians, Europeans and Americans – have gathered together to build the Holy Land and dwell in it! The Divine promise from thousands of years ago – "Even if your exiles be at the furthest end of Heaven, the Lord your G-d will gather you from there and from there He will fetch you, and the Lord your G-d will bring you to the land which your forefathers inherited, and you will inherit it" – is coming true before our very eyes! From the first this promise sounded dubious, and so much more so after 2,000 years of exile. But we are witnessing its fulfillment!

Ezekiel the Prophet uses the analogy of dry bones which approach one another, grow flesh and sinew, then skin, and they come back to life! And in fact when we look at what's happening to us now, we see a true resurrection!

The incredible miracle we have seen in recent generations certainly deserves to be considered a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy: "No more will they say 'By the Lord who brought Israel up from Egypt' but 'By the Lord who brought Israel from the North and from all the lands into which I exiled them'." And as the sages said: "Not that the Exodus from Egypt will be totally

uprooted, but the latter exiles will be considered more significant than the Egyptian exile." The latter exiles more significant!

What should the Jews do as a result of these events? Isaiah the Prophet says (Isaiah 40:6): "Go up a high mountain, O bringer of good tidings to Zion, and raise your voice, fear not, and say to the cities of Judah: "*Hinei Elokeichem!*" Behold your G-d!" Don't see these events as ordinary political developments. Call out proudly: We are seeing the works of G-d before our very eyes!
Behold your G-d!

And this cry – Behold your G-d! – is the heart of Yom Ha'atzmaut!

Superficial people are liable to read the events of recent generations as one reads a newspaper. They see how things have developed "normally and naturally" from day to day, from year to year. Here a small group of immigrants arrives, some of them give up and return to their native land; there is an important discussion between an Israeli diplomat and an English MP; through the convolutions of politics promises are made and broken; and so on and so forth.

But here we need an inclusive, comprehensive overview of what is happening to us. Then faith bursts out of its own accord – **Behold your G-d!**

I once asked, during a class before Yom Ha'atzmaut, what the most important part of the Yom Ha'atzmaut service is. At the end I gave my opinion: the recitation of the Sh'ma! Not only because reciting the Sh'ma is a Torah commandment, but because the recitation of the Sh'ma on this day should be heard much more profoundly than on any other day! The founding of the State, which represents everything that's happening to us in this era, is our amazing encounter with the Master of the World!

If we were worthy, this cry of faith would be heard from every mouth of every Jew who believes in G-d, calling every Jew's attention to the deep significance of the establishment of the State, which would have a profound influence on the general mood in Israel and bring about a tremendous fixing in our spiritual condition.

This country, which came into being through G-d's kindness, should be "the foundation of G-d's throne in the world." The Jewish people was chosen by

G-d to be a priestly nation and a holy people. A nation which manifests the acceptance of G-d's kingship through its actions. Our purpose, to be a light unto the nations, will be truly fulfilled not through the righteousness of individual Jews but by being a priestly **nation**. Only a priestly nation can demonstrate an entire lifestyle based on G-dly ideals. Thus it is written of King Shlomo: "And Shlomo sat as King on the Lord's throne!"

The truth is, we are far from this ideal. There are many Jews who have not yet enjoyed the benefit of the light of Torah. Clearly they don't know who the Jewish people really are and what we should aim to achieve. Some of them don't even know that there is a value and importance to being a Jew. Among the G-d-fearing, too, there is much fixing to be done. Needless to say, this is why the State doesn't manifest the G-dly ideals as it should.

We also have to deal with many worldly issues. Israel is constantly at war. Sometimes it is a military war, sometimes "only" a difficult diplomatic battle. Our political situation is unbearably complicated. Socially, too, we have much to fix.

Nonetheless we celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut with great joy.

We celebrate and are joyous on Yom Ha'atzmaut not because we think everything is as it should be. We see the difficulties. But we don't let them blind us to the most important thing! Here we are in the Land of Israel, the land of our forefathers. G-d has gathered us from the four corners of the Earth and given us the opportunity to run the State of Israel as it should be run. We are thankful for the past and we pray for the future.

The Hallel, which the prophets of Israel instructed us to recite over every trial and tribulation from which we are rescued, also includes a prayer for the future: "**Please, O Lord, save us.**" Until the final and complete Redemption when everything is as it should be, we will always have a need to pray for the future. But recognition of the great difficulties doesn't ruin the Hallel. And after we say "Please, O Lord, save us" we say "Praise the Lord for He is good, for His kindness is eternal"!