

Yom Ha'atzmaut: Heeding the Call

Following on the solemn heels of Yom Hazikaron, Yom Haatzmaut evokes a variety of contradictory feelings: joy and sorrow, remembrance, pride, and hope. Even more powerful for us, as parents and as educators, is a sense of awe. On the 5th of Iyar we stand in awe of our young men and women, some mere teenagers, whose bravery and dedication played a key role in the establishment of the State of Israel and shaped the course of Jewish history.

A visit to Har Herzl brings this home: walking through the rows of graves highlights the sacrifice of our young patriots who gave their lives for the Jewish homeland. Consider the story of David Shalti, a 20-year-old Jerusalemite, who was wounded in the battle for Atarot. Two days later, with only one functioning arm, he jumped out of his sickbed to join the reinforcements heading south to Gush Etzion. Despite his heroic efforts, he and 150 other defenders of the Gush were massacred after trying to negotiate a surrender. The following day, Ben Gurion read the Declaration of Independence and Shalti's young wife gave birth to a son.

Shalti was but one of tens of thousands of our youth who heeded the call of their people, who recognized that they were in a position to contribute to our collective future, and seized the opportunity without a moment's hesitation. What motivated



Mrs. Dina Blank

Faculty, Machon Maayan and Shaalvim for Women

these young men and women? Moreover, on Yom Haatzmaut, what lessons can we glean from their dedication and sacrifice?

Our young heroes, knowingly or not, consciously or otherwise, embraced the age-old Jewish values of hard work, self-reliance, and resolve, or what John Kotter from the Harvard Business School calls a “sense of urgency.” These guidelines for Jewish living are at the core of our faith and were promoted by Chazal in Pirkei Avot when they taught:

אם אין אני לי מי לי, וכשאני לעצמי מה אני,
ואם לא עכשיו אימתי.

If I am not for myself, who is for me, and if I am for myself, what am I, and if not now, when?

Avot 1:14

היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה והפועלים
עצלנים והשכר הרבה ובעל הבית דוחק.
*The day is short, the work is plenty, the
workers are lazy, the reward is great, and
the Master of the house is demanding.*

Avot 2:20

This focus on hard work and urgency is fundamental to Torah observance and learning. Indeed, the ethic of *amel*, toil, is famously highlighted in *Torat*

Kohanim as the essential component for receiving the Divine blessing: *Im bechukotai telechu: shetihiyu ameilim BaTorah* — If you walk in my ways: [meaning that] you shall toil in the Torah.

Similarly, the Piaseczner Rav, Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, instructs us in *Chovat Hatalmidim*:

”כל עבודה לפי ערך הדבר הנקנה נמדדת,
דברים זולים ושטותים כמעט בלי עבודה
נקנים, ודברים יקרים מהם ביותר עבודה
קונים אותם, וללמוד תורה ולחסות בצל
קדשו רק בעבודה קשה יכולים להגיע. לא
בעבודה שהיא קשה וגדולה מן יכולת האדם,
כי ה' יתברך לא נתן לנו עבודה למעלה
מכוחותינו ויכלתינו, רק שצריכים להתאמץ
ולהתחזק בה, לא לעבוד בלבד בשעה שבאה
עבודה לידו, רק להיות איש עובד בעצם ולא
מתרפה.”

חובת התלמידים עמ' כב-כג

The amount of labor necessary to acquire an object should be equal to the value of that which is being obtained. Objects that have little worth may be acquired without much labor, while one must work hard in order to obtain something that is very precious. Strenuous labor is needed to be really able to learn Torah and to dwell in the holy presence of God. The labor is difficult, but not beyond

human capacity, for God never gives us tasks that transcend our powers and abilities. It is necessary, however, that we make an effort to work and serve God not only when we are faced with specific tasks. Our identity as a worker must become part of our essential self.

**A Student's Obligation (Aronson)
pg. 38**

In this passage, Rav Shapira enjoins the youth, the talmidim, to embrace the notion of hard work, and to recognize that all precious things in life require the investment of time and labor. While this is certainly true in the world of Torah learning, it is equally true in the world of Jewish communal life. And though achievements in Torah and in community development do not come easily, one does not have the luxury of abdicating responsibility. Instead, the Piaseczner insists that while our Torah obligations require great effort and hard work, God did not assign us responsibilities beyond our capacity to perform. As Chazal implied in the famous midrash regarding the outstretched arm of Par'oh's daughter as she grabbed for Moshe, many things that seem out of reach are actually within our grasp if one makes the effort.

These values help us understand what roused our young Jewish heroes of the 20th century. They were swept up by a sense of urgency, an understanding that nobody else would rise to the challenge. More important perhaps, they understood that simply hoping, yearning, and wishing from the sidelines would no longer be sufficient. To achieve statehood, they needed to act. And so they did. On Yom Haatzmaut, we celebrate them as much as we celebrate these timeless Jewish values, values that have

motivated Jews throughout history.

In 1965, in an inspiring Sukkot morning sermon, Rabbi Norman Lamm exhorted his Jewish Center congregants to adopt these principles of action, toil, and commitment:

Without labor and struggle, without exertion of the intellect and long hours of patient plodding, one can neither master the intricacies of any profession, nor can achieve great and satisfying success in any business. It is true about children — if we over-protect them, if we train them to accept easy triumphs, the shortcuts to success, then they will grow up without backbones, nurtured on the infantile conception that a wishbone is enough. Such people can never fly, they can only flutter. Their vision never soars, their dreams remain myopic, their conceptions petty . . . To be a Jew means never to look only for the easy way. It means never to sacrifice conviction for convenience, although convenience in and of itself is no sin. It means always to search for the road of the greatest meaning and duty. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great founder of the Musar movement, put it this way: "I have never asked myself if I can do something, only if I ought to. And if I ought to, then I always knew that I would be able to." This is the language of the Jew.

What Rabbi Lamm terms the "language of the Jew" is the message of Yom Haatzmaut. Herzl's "If you will it, it is no dream" was piggy-backing on centuries of Jewish wisdom and deep-rooted tradition and at a time of national crisis, when it counted most, the youth stood up to wave the proverbial flag.

In 2012, Cheryl Halpern, a member of the United States Holocaust Memorial and Museum Council, wrote an op-ed for JTA that focused on one simple

question: Where have all the student activists gone? Halpern, a former volunteer for the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (SSSJ), reminisced about the rallies, the signs, and the letter writing campaigns that were led by young activists and wondered aloud:

Where are today's Jewish students? . . . I wonder whether an SSSJ movement as existed in the 1960s and 1970s could be created today. Would we see the students of today marching and protesting outside Russian embassies and consulates or across from the United Nations? Or would their choice of activity be limited to blogging and tweeting without a visible, united physical presence to be noted?

Halpern's question should haunt us on this Yom Haatzmaut. Are today's teens, the children of those who marched to the White House chanting "Let Our People Go," prepared to go to the barricades as did their predecessors?

Our community must ensure that our children heed the message of Yom Haatzmaut. We must encourage them to recognize the centrality and importance of effort, of toil, of labor. We must expose them to stories of youthful heroism and teach them that each one of them has a unique mission to fulfill and that the urgent needs of the Jewish people outweigh transient goals. We must raise children with backbones, and give them ample opportunities to exercise those muscles so that when the time comes, they too will heed the Yom Haatzmaut call, *im lo achshav eimatai* — if not now, when?, and speak "the language of the Jew."