

Seven Decades of Torah Life in the State of Israel 1948–1957

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14TH MAY 1948 – A TOUCH OF HOLINESS

The birth of the State of Israel was one of the most incredible moments in Jewish history. But because Israel is such a major part of our lives, and something we have grown up with, it is hard to comprehend that its birth almost didn't happen at all. Independence was not a foregone conclusion, but actually the result of a gripping story — culminating in a decision that came down to a single vote.¹

By May 1948, the UN had approved the Partition Plan, which promised a Jewish state in Palestine, and the worn-out British were preparing to leave Palestine on May 15th. There was international support for a Jewish state, and the British mandatory power were leaving, giving the Zionist leadership a golden opportunity — they had the chance to declare a Jewish State! But while the dream seemed within reach, it was by no means a simple decision. If they declared independence, it was clear

Israel would have to fight a war of survival on the day of its birth. Already since November, 700 Jews had been killed by local Arab attacks, and at this stage, the Jewish army did not even have a single plane — how on earth could they survive an Arab invasion on multiple fronts? U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall told Moshe Sharrett, the foreign minister in waiting, that declaring independence was tremendously risky, and that the Jews could not rely on U.S. support in the upcoming war. Independence beckoned, but with it, great danger.

On Wednesday May 12th 1948, the Moetzet Ha'am — the Jewish government in waiting — gathered to make the fateful decision. Headed by Ben Gurion, the Moetzet Ha'am consisted of thirteen men, though only ten could attend the vote.² History had its eye on them; the ripple effects of these men's decision would be felt around the world, and long into the future. The votes were cast: Four voted

against declaring independence, and six voted for.³ Two days later, on Friday May 14th, Ben Gurion read out the Declaration of Independence, sparking jubilation around the Jewish world. Israel would indeed be badly bruised by the War of Independence but it battled through, and the dream was born.

This story is a truly gripping drama, but it also contains within it a deeper level of Jewish significance. In halakha, there is the concept of a *davar shebikedusha*, a matter of sanctity, like parts of Jewish liturgy, such as *Barchu*, *Kedusha*, and *Kaddish*. A *davar shebikedusha* requires a quorum of ten men in order to be recited. Without this quorum — *minyan* — a *davar shebikedusha* is not recited. However, the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 69:1, and later commentaries⁴ qualify that ten men must be present, but only six of them are required to perform the service. For example, if some people in the room already prayed earlier, then as long as there are six

men praying, and an additional four men present, then that is sufficient.

Though the protagonists may not have known it, the decision to declare the state of Israel conformed to the exact rules of a *davar shebikedusha*. A minyan of ten Jewish men gathered, with six of them “performing the service”, voting for independence, fulfilling the minimum requirement of a *davar shebikedusha*. While of course not being a formal ritual or part of halakha, it is poignant that the decision to found the State of Israel conformed to the exact rules of a matter of sanctity.

What is it that makes the State of Israel not only significant, but holy? There is no one answer to this question. For some, the State of Israel is *inherently* holy — it is the living fulfilment of Biblical prophecies, the embodiment of the Divine promise that the Jews will return to the land and make it flower once again. For others, the State of Israel is a *vehicle* for holiness: government institutions rest on Shabbat, air traffic stops on Yom Kippur, and the Israeli government today is by far the largest supporter of Torah learning in the world.⁵ Rabbi Meir Soloveichik also notes a more subtle aspect⁶ — that the State of Israel is bound up with the *experience* of the holy and transcendent. The defining photo in Israel’s history is not of a Nobel Prize winner, a fighter jet, or skyscrapers in Tel Aviv, but of the three paratroopers at the Western Wall in 1967. It is a powerful image; at the end of a hard fought war, planned out in detail and trained for over years, the victorious soldiers look heavenward, humbled by the grand narrative of which they are just a small part — the transcendent is part of Israel’s national DNA. Thus in its essence, its function and its narrative, Israel is tinged with holiness.

Israel was declared in the late afternoon of Friday, May 14th. The Shabbos eve, Erev Shabbat, is a special time. Poignantly, the Mishna says that Erev Shabbat is the time when the more spiritual things in our world were created.⁷ As the sun set on that Friday afternoon, seventy years ago, our people experienced something truly amazing; a moment, whose beauty, and holiness, is wonderfully captured by Yehuda Avner:⁸

“As the sun went down, grimy, exhausted diggers assembled in the glow of a hurricane lamp hanging on the door of a stone ruin, hidden from enemy view, to recite the Sabbath eve prayers — Kabbalat Shabbat. It was a heavenly pause; Shabbat stillness seemed to reign over everything...”

“I have news. I have news.” To a man we scampered back into the flickering glow where Linder grabbed him (Mahler) by the arms and snapped, “Well — talk. What did you find out? ... Has Ben-Gurion declared independence, yes or no?”

(Mahler responded) “David Ben-Gurion declared independence this afternoon in Tel Aviv. The Jewish state comes into being at midnight.”

There was a dead silence. Midnight was minutes away. Even the air seemed to be holding its breath. “Oh, my God, what have we done?” cried one of the women diggers, fitfully rubbing her chin with the tips of her fingers. “What have we done? Oh, my God, what have we done?” and she burst into tears, whether in ecstasy or dismay I will never know. Then cheers, tears, embraces. Every breast filled with exultation as we pumped hands, cuddled, kissed, in an ovation that went on and on. Nobody wanted it to stop. “A leheim to the new state!”

“Wait!” shouted a hassid whom everybody knew as Nussen der hazzan — a cantor by calling, and a most

diligent volunteer digger from the ultra-Orthodox Mea Shearim Jerusalem quarter. “It’s Shabbos. Kiddush first.” Our crowd gathered around him in a hush as Nussen der hazzan clasped the mug and, in a sweet cantorial tone began to chant “Yom hashishi” — the blessing for the sanctification of the Sabbath day. As Nussen’s sacred verses floated off to a higher place of Sabbath bliss, some of us sobbed uncontrollably. Like a violin, his voice swelled, ululated, and trilled in the night, octave upon octave, his eyes closed, his cup stretched out and up. And as he concluded the final consecration — “Blessed art thou O Lord, who has hallowed the Sabbath” — he rose on tiptoe, his arm stiffened, and rocking back and forth like an ecstatic rabbi, voice trembling with excitement, he added the triumphantly exulted festival blessing to commemorate having reached this day — sheheheyanu, vekiyemanu vehegiyanu lezman hazeh.”

“Amen!”

Endnotes

1 The story of these days is told by Ze’ev Sharaf in his book, *Three Days*. Sharaf was the secretary of the transitional government that came to power when Israel was declared.

2 Two members, Yehuda Greenbaum and Rav Yehuda Leib Fischman, were trapped in besieged Yerushalayim, and Rav Yitzchak Meir Levin was in the United States.

3 David Ben Gurion, Moshe Shapira, Aharon Zisling, Moshe Sharret, Mordechai Bentov and Peretz Bernstein voted for, and Pinchas Rosenne, Eliezer Kaplan, David Remez and Bechor-Shalom Shitrit voted against.

4 Mishnah Berura 69:5.

5 See this author’s article “The State We Are In: The Missing Side of the State of Israel,” available at <https://www.torahmusings.com/2015/04/the-state-we-are-in-the-missing-side-of-the-state-of-israel/>

6 Lecture available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBUqH0G7OjY>

7 Pirkei Avot 5:6, see Maharal, *Derech Chaim* there.

8 Yehuda Avner, *The Prime Ministers*, p. 63.