

Yom Ha'atzmaut in the Shadow of October 7th

Moshe Taragin

This will be a very different Yom Ha'atzmaut. We are in the middle of a war and our nation is still suffering from the barbaric attack of October 7th. There are manifold layers of grief. 133 hostages are still held in shadowy tunnels of Aza by homicidal maniacs. Thousands of Israeli families are mourning heartbreaking losses. Thousands of our soldiers are recovering physically and healing emotionally from their war wounds. Tens of thousands are still displaced from their homes, with no clear date for a return. We face military aggression, as well as a wave of rabid antisemitism. Our future feels uncertain. Celebrating Israeli Independence while ignoring or even momentarily setting aside our anguish is insensitive and callous. This year, our celebrations must be muted and low-keyed.

Not only must the festivities be restrained, but our attitude and our emotional mindset must be calibrated to the current situation. We cannot completely ignore this day, since it represents everything we currently fight and struggle for. How can we approach Independence Day during a period of such mourning, hardship, and uncertainty? Perhaps, instead of joyous celebration, this year's Yom Ha'atzmaut should be a day of historical reflection, of pondering Jewish sovereignty and of contemplating how the war has altered our collective identity.

This year we savor Jewish sovereignty more deeply than in the past, when we may have taken it for granted. October 7th demonstrated how vulnerable we continue to be and how vital Israel is to our future security and survival. Jew hatred isn't going anywhere, and, in the long term, no Jew is safe without a Jewish state. If anything, October 7th infuses this year's Yom Ha'atzmaut with more profound meaning.

October 7th was the first pogrom in history to be followed by a war. In the hours after the initial attack soldiers, police, security teams, and ordinary citizens rallied to defend our country, thereby preventing a potentially apocalyptic catastrophe. In the months since, we have courageously waged a just and moral war to dismantle the murder machinery of our enemies. We have doggedly persisted, even though much of the world cannot see through the smokescreen of hatred and

antisemitism. Despite the swirling uncertainty, we remain strong and resilient. We will defend our country. We will dismantle terror and eliminate the subhuman murderers who burned, raped, and mutilated. We will build a brighter future. On Yom Ha'atzmaut affirm Jewish sovereignty and affirm our future.

Where was Hashem?

Religiously, we continue to struggle with many vexing questions. How did this happen? How could Hashem allow a sadistic attack on our people in our homeland? Weren't these grisly and horrific scenes relics of our tortured past in exile? How could our enemies weaponize both the day of Shabbat and the day of Simchat Torah against our people?

Intervals of confusion during which the hand of Hashem isn't evident are called periods of *hester panim*. In exile we endured thousands of years of the obscuring of Hashem. We have just lived through six months of this murky obscurity.

Yet, our current period of divine concealment feels very different from the past. Despite the darkness, we have periodically seen Hashem's hand. This tragedy could have been much worse, had the genocidal plans of our enemies succeeded. Despite their attempts to ignite a regional war and despite ongoing tensions in the North we are not entangled in a potentially more deadly and dangerous multi-front war.

On the eve of October 7th our society was badly fractured by a year of nasty and venomous social discord. Had this attack occurred a few months later would we have been too badly splintered to mount a united defense?

A month ago, we faced a deadly barrage of Iranian ballistic missiles. After a night of fear and anxiety we safely awoke to a quiet morning, grateful that we already possessed the technology to save thousands of lives.

Sometimes Hashem's presence is visible in the big picture. Sometimes though, the larger calculus doesn't make sense, but we can still discern His presence in the smaller details.

Moderating Expectations

There is profound religious and historical meaning to our return to Israel. Never before has an entire nation migrated from across the globe, returning to their ancient homeland. This extraordinary voyage is exactly what our enemies cannot comprehend. Their only reference point is the exploitative colonialism of the past. Our national pilgrimage back to Israel is a fulfillment of a divine promise delivered thousands of years ago. It is our historical destiny.

Viewing our return as a religious and historical destiny, though, has triggered unrealistic and simplistic expectations. We haven't been warmly embraced by our neighbors and local populations aren't just disappearing. We must still convince much of our world of the need for a Jewish homeland.

The past six months have reminded us that our epic historical project may be slower and more complicated than we expected. Our historical undertaking will take much longer than anticipated and will not conform to our simplistic expectations.

Discovery

The war has also affirmed or uncovered much about the nature of our people. This should provide optimism about our future.

The war has convincingly answered pressing questions about the current generation. How would a tik tok generation respond to adversity? How would a start-up nation of prosperity react to hardship and sacrifice? Could our children match the courage and dedication of previous chalutzim? The war has proven that love for our people and sacrifice for our land is woven into our national DNA regardless of ethnic, religious, or political divides. Our future is in good hands.

Restoration of Our Story

October 7th thrust unity upon us. Fighting for survival, we were forced to band together to stem the initial wave of violence and to launch our counterattack. We were united by the immediate crisis. Long-term though, durable unity requires a common story.

During the initial decades of our state, we shared a powerful and captivating common story. Our nation was chosen to inspire humanity by living a moral and religious lifestyle. Our failures cast us into exile. After two thousand years of roaming the wastelands of history we suffered the worst crime ever perpetrated against humanity. In the wake of this national horror, we returned home, cobbled together a robust democracy, crafted a free market economy, and absorbed Jews from across the planet, while facing unending violence.

As we became successful, our story began to fade. The memory of the holocaust gradually dimmed, and our success caused us to forget our story.

This war has resurrected our common story. We may have forgotten our story, but our enemies certainly haven't, and they never fail to remind us. This war has reopened the book of Jewish history. We are living through a crucial chapter in that book.

An International Community

The war has also strengthened the bonds of our international family. Fanatical antisemitism has reminded Jews around the world just how critical Israel is to their survival. The Jewish international community provided our people with billions of shekel of aid, loving emotional support and crucial political backing.

This is not the time for festive celebrations. This Yom Ha'atzmaut will be a somber but meaningful day of gratitude, introspection, and hope.

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