

Israel at 75

A Diamond Jubilee Reflection

The following words I speak are one's I never imagined I would ever have to say.

Last year, I felt compelled to join an organization whose primary goal is to give Rabbis a safe space to speak positively about Israel. I joined a group of 200 Rabbis from all denominations including Orthodox Rabbis, called ZRC, The Zionist Rabbinic Coalition co-founded by my daughter, Rabbi Ariel Boxman.

You see the demonization of Israel has reached the point that even if Rabbis speak in support of Israel on social media, they are scorned, mocked and even denounced as supporters of an apartheid, racist country, by fellow Rabbis!

To think that in 2022, Rabbis would need to seek cover in order to publically share their support for Israel is a nightmare that needs to be addressed. For if Rabbis have turned their backs on Israel, what does that say of "AMCHA" in other words the Jews in the Pews.

Tonight as we draw near to Israel's Diamond Jubilee celebration of 75 years on May 14, 2023, it is necessary more than ever to reflect on the meaning of Israel's existence, her triumphs, her challenges and her failures over the last 75 years as well as to look ahead to the next 25 years to imagine the Israel we dream of as she nears her first 100 years.

In order to share this perspective, I turn to Gematria, the ancient practice of Hebrew numerology wherein each Hebrew letter represents a number, as in aleph=1, bet=2, gimel=3 and so forth. In considering the number "75" I have discovered 3 words or phrases to give shape to my discourse tonight.

Three words or phrases which equal the total of 75 when combining the sum of each of their letters are Lamah, Y'hudim and **Bayom** Ha-Hu.

Let me begin with the word **Lamah**, why? It is a fair question to ask periodically why and for what purpose does something exist. On this day of all days, this Erev Yom Kippur, we ask that question of ourselves. What of my life, what purpose does it serve, why do I exist?

So too nations ought to reflect on the same existential questions.

For us as Jews, Israel exists today as the only democratic, Jewish, independent sovereign country in the world, recreated after 2,000 years in exile.

For us as Jews, the first command to the very first Jew, the first to practice ethical monotheism, Avram is Lech L'cha, - "and God spoke to Avram telling him to leave his birthplace, his native home, his family, and go to the land - Ha-aretz-the land God would show him."

With that command which Avram fulfills, we begin a 4,000-year love affair with that small piece of land, variously called Canaan, Eretz Yisrael, Palestine or Medinat Yisrael, the State of Israel.

As Israel's Declaration of Independence states, Eretz Yisrael was the birthplace of our nation. In the course of those 4,000 years, at times we governed ourselves independently and at other times we were subject to the various empires who ruled over us, but always was there a Jewish presence in the land.

Over the last almost 75 years with the rise of the Modern State of Israel, Israel has fulfilled her main task, the ingathering of the exiles; Israel was created in part to provide a safe haven for Jews, a homeland for our people oppressed by anti-Semitic policies or caught up in conflicts that threaten their security and

wellbeing. The most recent example is the thousands of Jews fleeing the Ukraine who found refuge in the Jewish State.

The second major purpose of Israel's existence is to give the Jewish people agency, the ability to determine its own fate, no longer subject to the whims of those who "tolerate" us, or who would eventually come to exterminate us.

Finally, Israel was in the words of her own declaration of independence formed to live out the prophetic ideals enshrined in the Bible, to build a nation founded upon the principles of democracy, justice and the pursuit of peace.

So then Lamah, why is it that even after 75 years, Israel still has to justify her existence? In response to those who begrudge her right to exist, or condemn her for so called apartheid policies and behaviors, I would: adjure them

1. For not recognizing that Israel is like every other country on earth imperfect, and flawed but also capable of improvement and reform.
2. For holding Israel to moral standards that are hypocritical at best and anti-Semitic at worst. Consider our own country, our own horrific treatment of Native Americans, occupying their land, violently vanquishing their numbers or how we

enslaved African Americans, segregated them, and to this day perpetuate prejudice and bias against them. Israel should be held accountable for its own share of mistreatment and brutality, but must also be viewed with a bit of self-reflective humility.

3. For not recognizing the disease of antisemitism which culminated in the Holocaust. I dare you to look in the eyes of 6 million Jews, 1 ½ million Jewish children, and tell them Israel does not matter. Had Israel existed as an independent sovereign nation just 10 years earlier, think how many lives would have been saved. Or in our own day, how a nuclear armed Iran would or could carry out its stated goal to wipe Israel off the face of the earth, and how Iran's proxies in Gaza and in Lebanon sit on Israel's borders, ever ready to go to war.

4. For not taking the time to learn the facts, the history, and the narratives of both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In a long and protracted conflict such as this, one must not jump to conclusions based on the latest incident, or sound bite or Instagram post but rather realize that peace and justice will only prevail when one respects nuance and listens

deeply and with empathy to the pain and sorrow of the other side.

5. For sitting on the sidelines, taking pot shots at those who live with the devastating effects of the conflict, every day whether living under Israeli occupation, or living with the ever present threats of terror, rather than engaging actively with NGO's and organizations who are working earnestly to find a way to resolve the conflict.

In sum for sure there is much to be critical of with regard to Israel, but coming from a place of love, allows that criticism to be heard. Similarly, we must remember that Israel is a democracy with a free press, allowing for Israelis themselves to be the most critical of all.

More than all of the above, however, is the recognition of all the good that Israel has brought to the world in the last 75 years.

That brings me to the word, **Y'hudim**, Jews. With the establishment of the Jewish State, the Jewish people found a way to survive in the shadow of genocide. Rising like a phoenix out of the ashes of the Holocaust, the Jewish people rehabilitated

itself by taking on the task of building a state from the ground up. Reviving Hebrew as a living language after lying dormant for almost 3,000 years is among her greatest achievements. Today now everything from robotics to computer science, from medicine to business ethics, is spoken in the language of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos.

Fulfilling the Zionist visionary and writer, Ahad Ha-am's dream, Israel has become the center of world Jewry, pulsating with culture, finance, and bio-technology earning the title, start-up nation. Israel is second only to the US with companies traded on the NY Stock Exchange and at the same time radiates Jewish culture, of every variety to the 4 corners of the earth.

My point is to remind the world how much poorer it would be without Israeli ingenuity, creativity and innovation. A very partial list of Israeli inventions that changed the world or gifts Y'hudim, Jews have contributed to the betterment of humanity include:

1. Israeli medical teams and first responders who are almost always the first on the scene of a disaster whether it be Hurricane superstorm Sandy that

devastated the Northeast in 2012, or on the borders of Ukraine just this year helping refugees fleeing Russian aggression.

2. Inventions that have changed the way we live including the GPS app known as Waze, the first cell phone technology, the Pentium Chip for the microprocessor which created the first PC's, the firewall for computer safety, the cherry tomato, Krav Maga, We Work, Drip Irrigation, the Iron Dome, Rummy Cube, the Pill Cam, the first solar water heaters, Bambas, desalinization plants for drinking water and so much more. In fact, I've barely scratched the surface.

Looking ahead to the near future, Israel is among world leaders in successfully engineering the first privately owned all electric vertical take-off and landing vehicles, which will truly change the way we live. Who knew that the Jetson's were Jewish? (You have to be of a certain age to understand that joke).

Looking back on 75 years, Israel has so much to be proud of, doing so all the while with enemy nations on every side and having to survive multiple wars and terror attacks and with few natural resources.

Indeed, the miracle that is the rejuvenation of the Jewish people and her extraordinary accomplishments over the last 75 years is at least as important to remember and celebrate as it is to criticize Israel's challenges and failures.

Perspective requires looking at the whole picture.

Finally, we come to the phrase **Bayom Ha-hu**. Bayom Ha-hu means that day in the future when a better day will have dawned.

What will Israel look like, 25 years from now when it celebrates its centennial anniversary? Bayom Ha-hu is that phrase from the Aleynu prayer that asks us to imagine the world that can yet be, a vision and a hope for better times ahead.

We are a people that survives by never giving up and by believing that the impossible is possible. Whoever thought that Israel could turn the desert green, that Israel would make peace with Egypt after 4 wars in the space of 23 years, or that Israel would be among only 7 nations to send an astronaut into space?

So looking ahead, I pray for an Israel that has ended its occupation of the West Bank, has made peace with the Palestinians, wherein 2 states for 2 peoples living side by side is a reality. How this will transpire and what the final arrangements will look like are unknown given the current state of affairs and real politique, but keeping alive this vision is essential for Israel to get out of the business of ruling over another people and to live in peace with secure and internationally recognized borders for the first time since her birth.

Even though the current political landscape on both sides of the conflict leaves little room for optimism, still this ongoing occupation is a stain on Israel's moral character and demands a solution.

Secondly, I pray that the existential threat that Iran poses to Israel is no more.

Hopefully, through diplomatic means, but if necessary by regime change from within or if absolutely necessary by military means, the menace Iran poses is Israel's greatest military challenge. A nuclear armed Iran would be a disaster not just for Israel, but the entire Middle East.

Third, I pray that religious pluralism in Israel is supported by not only the majority of her citizens, but is enshrined in law.

Reform and Conservative Jews must have equal status in the Jewish state. It is unconscionable that as a Reform Rabbi, I have more rights in Germany than in the country I love so much. Non-Orthodox Rabbis and institutions must receive their fair share of government funding, be represented with a seat at the table when decisions of religion and state take place, and be allowed to perform all lifecycle events with recognition by the government. I pray that there will no longer need to be Women of the Wall monthly services, as finally the Kotel agreement providing for a dignified, secure and jointly administered egalitarian prayer space is implemented, as was agreed to by all parties, then rescinded by Netanyahu and his government and shelved for the past 4 years.

Finally, I pray that the ever widening socio-economic gap between the haves and have nots in Israel will be closed, allowing for Israel's under class to climb the economic ladder of success. Ethiopian Jews, Israeli Arabs who make up 20% of Israel's population, Sudanese refugees and Haredi and ultra-Orthodox families are among Israel's poorest. For any democracy to thrive, a strong middle class is necessary. Hopefully the unbelievably strong Israeli economy will benefit those

who need it most as well as those on top who generate wealth.

So as Israel celebrates her Diamond Jubilee anniversary, looking backwards and ahead, I encourage you to deepen your knowledge, engagement and

commitment to Israel by joining the many Israel connections we offer here at CKT.

I invite you to join our ARZA, Israel Connections Committee which plans and organizes events and activities including speakers, lectures, Israel movie nights, and Israel's Yorn Haatzmaut celebration. Please save the date of April 22, 2023 for a special night honoring Israel on her 75th birthday. Also think about joining CKT for our next pilgrimage to Israel scheduled for June 12-23. This trip will appeal to first timers as well as returnees. A flyer like this one is on the table on your way out if you are interested in joining us.

I conclude with the words of psalmist who in his or her yearning, poetically asks for justice and peace to reign over Jerusalem, to be etched within her walls, and executed in her gates.

Psalm 122 composed possibly 3,000 years ago bears witness to our peoples undying love for Zion and our hopes and prayers for her wellbeing. May these

words capture the spirit of my discourse and inspire in you a renewed love of Zion.