**Yom Ha'atzmaut: On the Road at 60**

**By Rabbi Toba Spitzer**

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This year, the state of Israel turns \_0. In a human life, a \_0th birthday marks maturity, a time of accumulated accomplishment and accumulated challenge, a time to look back while still looking forward. In the life of a nation, \_0 years is not a particularly long time at all. How do we mark \_0 years in the 3,000-year journey of the Jewish people?

The Zionist leaders who founded the state of Israel clearly had a sense of their place in the long line of Jewish history, even as they made a historic break with the past two millen- nia of that history. In re-establishing Jewish political independence, they sought to meld historical and mythic Jewish connections to the land of Israel with modern ideals of de- mocracy, equality, and pluralism. Thus they began an experiment – the creation of a par- ticularistic Jewish state that would also, according to Israel’s Declaration of Independence, “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex;”a refuge for the world’s Jews that would also “be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel.”

Yom Ha’atzmaut is an opportunity to return to these basic principles, a time to reflect on and wrestle with the contradictions and complexities at the core of the modern Jewish state. Sixty years after the drafters of the American Declaration of Independence declared that “all men are created equal,” the United States was dishearteningly far from realizing its own founders’ ideals. Another 170 years down the road, we are getting much closer on some fronts and still struggling on others. Where will the Israeli reality be, in relation to its founders’ vision, in another 100 years? 200? What will have become of the experiment to create a Jewish, democratic nation?

While \_0 years is not a long time in the life of a nation, there is a good deal of urgency today among those who care deeply about Israel, a sense on both the right and the left that perhaps we are running out of time. There are many who fear that Israel is facing a physi- cal existential threat, that the proponents of radical Islam will stop at nothing to eradicate the Jewish state, and that the Palestinian people’s struggle for independence is at heart a component of this larger plan for annihilation. There are those who fear that without the establishment of a viable Palestinian state in the very near future, Israel’s ability to exist as both a Jewish and a democratic nation is at an end. Others fear less for Israel’s physical safety than its moral viability, concerned with the extensive damage the 40-year-old oc- cupation has wreaked upon Israel’s founding values, its commitment to socio-economic equality, and its social coherence.

In the midst of all this anxiety and despair, what is our responsibility as American rabbis? I would suggest that we embrace \_0 both as a time of maturity and as a marker on a much lon- ger road. American Jewish discourse about Israel, while certainly better than it was 20 years ago, is still far from mature. While open debate flows freely in Israel itself, here we are still debilitated by a fear of allowing public discussion of the very real difficulties and complexities inherent in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Too many of us silence ourselves, for fear of being cast out of the mainstream community. Too many of our constituents either cling to an outmoded, naïve vision of Israel as blameless and victimized, or see in Israel little but the embodiment of the sins of imperialist Europe.

A mature person can acknowledge the damage she has caused without feeling her own self- hood threatened; a mature person does not need to cling to either an idealized or a demon- ized version of his own past. To achieve maturity on this issue, American Jews need our leadership in having conversations about Israel that acknowledge the “catastrophe” that was the Palestinians’ mirror experience of the founding of the Jewish state. They need our help in articulating pride in the accomplishments of Israeli society without minimizing the past and ongoing traumas suffered by Palestinians in the occupied territories, or the very real inequalities facing Israel’s Arab citizens. In a mature relationship, one can still love another without pretending that she has no faults. It is far past the time for the American Jewish community to have a mature relationship with Israel and its citizens, and such a relation- ship will only emerge when our communal discourse embraces the full reality of the Jewish state.

As a marker on a much longer road, we also need to have the faith that \_0 is not the begin- ning of the end. None of us can know where the current situation will lead. Perhaps, with our leadership, the American Jewish community will become a powerful force pressuring the U.S. government to work actively to bring about a viable two-state solution, a solution that will provide for a lasting, just and secure peace for all the inhabitants of Israel and Pal- estine. Perhaps Israel will continue to evolve, and will someday fulfill in new ways its demo- cratic and Jewish commitments. Perhaps, another 100 years down the road, we can imagine a cosmopolitan Israeli nation at the heart of a revitalized, dynamic, and democratic Middle East. The founders of the state of Israel had the chutzpah to dream big and to act on those dreams. We are asked to dream no less big, and to also have the courage of our convictions – with the benefit of hindsight, and the experience of the past \_0 years, to guide our dreams and our actions.

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