

Striving for Holiness on Yom Ha'atzma'ut

April 19, 2018

Today we celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day. We began this morning with a rousing Hallel led by Stuart Rossman in minyan, and a meaningful tefila for the State of Israel chanted by Marty Lurie. Early this afternoon, our Thursday Torah study group finished its 17 year "Tourah" - that is, its "tour through Torah." The group began with the opening verses of Bereshit and finished today with the closing verses of D'varim: Moses dies while overlooking the Land of Israel. How did we mark this occasion of completion? Of course, through food and reflection, known as a siyyum, (a special thank you to Carol Stollar for organizing such a special day!)

Then, as we do on Simchat Torah evening, we "completed" Torah and began again. This time, however, we didn't return to the opening verses of Bereshit, but rather, we continued forward in history by beginning the Book of Joshua, which tells the story of the settlement of bnei Yisrael in the Land of Israel under their new leader, Joshua.

This was a powerful (though unanticipated) connection. As we celebrated Medinat Yisrael, the modern State of Israel, this morning, we began our study of the complex story of Eretz Yisrael, the Biblical, historical Land of Israel, this afternoon. We noted this connection between the ancient and modern as a group, leading to an interesting question: what was God's role in the Biblical story of the Israelites' settlement of the Land of Israel? And what was God's role, if any, in the founding of the modern State of Israel? Does the founding of the modern State Israel have religious significance? Is it a fulfilled aspiration of redemption, as our liturgy suggests it would one day be? Should we sing Hallel, which includes psalms that call out praise for God's hand in miracles, on Yom Ha'atzmaut?

As you might imagine, there are various opinions within the Jewish world about this (and these opinions don't follow the religious/non-religious ideological breaks you might expect). The focus of this particular debate is not on whether Israel should be celebrated at all, but rather, whether our understanding of the nature of God supports the idea that there is religious significance to historical events. While still contemporary, this is not a new question. Our ancient rabbis asked the same question about Hanukkah: should we say Hallel during Hanukkah, a post-Biblical holiday that celebrates an historical event?

What do you think? Ask your Shabbat guests or hosts. Or come sit with me in my study at Reyim or during kiddush on Shabbat. I'd love to hear your thoughts and share with you the responses of our modern rabbis and scholars, from Rav Soloveitchik to David Hartman and many more. As for me, my religious life depends on the constant act of striving for holiness. This is primary mitzvah: not "you are holy" but "may you become holy!" We actually never reach the end. If we stop striving, we will lose our religious soul. Ritually (in distinction to our learning group), when we complete reading Torah each year, we start back at the opening verses of Bereshit, asking once again how chaos (tohu v'vohu) somehow becomes the beauty of the world.

As long as we continue to aspire to fulfill the Divine's qualities in Torah such as patience, kindness, generosity, and peace, then I can say, Oseh Shalom Bimrovav. May God bring peace from above.

May this Yom Ha'atzmaut be a day of celebration and reflection.