

CEREMONY & CELEBRATION

FAMILY EDITION

THIS SERIES IS BASED ON THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF
RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל



YOM HA'ATZMAUT 5781

Educational content provided by Dr. Daniel Rose together with The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust

Yom Ha'atzmaut in a Nutshell

THE STATE OF ISRAEL came into existence on 14th May 1948, as David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, read the Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv on behalf of the provisional government. The Hebrew date was the 5th day of the month of Iyar 5708, and every year on this day we celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day (although this year the 5th of Iyar falls on Shabbat, so Yom Ha'atzmaut is celebrated on the previous

Thursday, 15th April, in order to avoid Shabbat desecration). In Israel the day is celebrated with an official ceremony on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem, nationwide street parties at night, and hiking and picnicking during the day. Religious Jews conduct special prayer services to acknowledge and give thanks to God for His role in the miraculous story of the establishment and continued existence of the State of Israel.



From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks

THE MIRACLE OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

The creation of the State of Israel was fraught with difficulty. Despite the Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which Britain, the new mandatory power in Palestine, promised Jews a national home, there was intense opposition – from the Arab world, from other international forces, from politicians in Britain, and at times from Jews themselves. For thirty years, various compromises were proposed, all accepted by Jews and rejected by their opponents. On the day the State of Israel was proclaimed, the country was attacked on all fronts by its neighbours. Since then, it has lived under constant threat of war, violence, terror, and delegitimation. Yet Israel has achieved wondrous things.

Through it, Hebrew, the language of the Bible, was reborn as a living tongue. Jewish communities under threat have been rescued, including those like the Jews of Ethiopia who had little contact with other Jews for centuries. Jews have

come to Israel from over a hundred countries, representing the entire lexicon of cultural diversity. A desolate landscape has bloomed again. Jerusalem has been rebuilt. The world of Torah scholarship, devastated by the Holocaust, has been revived and the sound of learning echoes throughout the land. Economically, politically, socially, and culturally, Israel's achievements are unmatched by any country of its age and size. The Sages said that, at the crossing of the Red Sea, the simplest Jew saw miracles that the greatest of later Prophets were not destined to see. That, surely, was the privilege of those who witnessed Israel's rebirth and youth. The Messiah has not come. Israel is not yet at peace. The Temple has not been rebuilt. Our time is not yet redemption. Yet many of the prayers of two thousand years have been answered. No one, reviewing this singular history, can doubt that faith makes a difference; that a nation's history is shaped by what it believes.



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Many of the heroes and pioneers of the return to Zion were not “spiritual”, nor did they observe many of the commandments. But the vision of the Prophets and the covenant of Jewish history flowed through their veins. God works through people; sometimes, so the Prophets taught, without their conscious knowledge and consent. It is difficult to reflect deeply on the rebirth of Israel without sensing the touch of heaven in the minds of men and women, leading them to play their parts in a drama so much greater than any individual could have executed, even conceived.

Who, then, wrote the script of the Jewish drama? God or the Jewish people? Or was it, as the Sages taught, an inextricable combination of both: God as He was heard by the people, and the people as they responded to God? Isaac Bashevis Singer came close when he said, “God is a writer and we are both the heroes and the readers.”

The Jonathan Sacks Haggada, pp. 66–68

REFLECT: Do you see God in the story of the establishment of the modern State of Israel? What role did humanity play in this story?

WHY A LAND?

[Jewish] destiny was to create a society that would honour the proposition that we are all created in the image and likeness of God. It would be a place in which the freedom of some would not lead to the enslavement of others.

Judaism is the code of a self-governing society. We tend to forget this, since Jews have lived in dispersion for two thousand years, without the sovereign power to govern themselves, and because modern Israel is a secular state.

Because Judaism is the code of a society, it is also about the social virtues: righteousness (*tzedek/tzedakah*), justice (*mishpat*), loving-kindness (*chesed*) and compassion (*rachamim*). These structure the template of biblical law, which covers all aspects of the life of society, its economy, its welfare systems, its education, family life, employer–employee relations, the protection of the environment and so on.

None of this is possible without a land. Judaism is the constitution of a self-governing nation,

the architectonics of a society dedicated to the service of God in freedom and dignity. Without a land and state, Judaism is a shadow of itself. In exile, God might still live in the hearts of Jews but not in the public square, in the justice of the courts, the morality of the economy and the humanitarianism of everyday life.

Jews have lived in almost every country under the sun. *In four thousand years, only in Israel have they been a free, self-governing people.* Only in Israel are they able, if they so choose, to construct an agriculture, a medical system, an economic infrastructure in the spirit of the Torah and its concern for freedom, justice and the sanctity of life. Only in Israel can Jews today speak the Hebrew of the Bible as the language of everyday speech. Only in Israel can they live Jewish time within a calendar structured according to the rhythms of the Jewish year. Only in Israel can Jews live Judaism in anything other than an edited edition. In Israel, and only there, Jews can walk where the Prophets walked, climb the mountains Avraham climbed, lift their eyes to the hills that David saw, and continue the story their ancestors began.

Future Tense, pp. 135–136

REFLECT: Can God be found “in the public square, in the justice of the courts, the morality of the economy and the humanitarianism of everyday life” in Israel today?

WHY THIS LAND?

Israel is not the Nile Delta or the Tigris-Euphrates valley. It is a land dependent on rain, and the rain in Israel is not predictable. But a message in Devarim (see Dev. 11:10–12) intimates a correlation between geography and spirituality. Israel is a place where people look up to heaven in search of rain, not down to earth and its natural water supply. It is a place where you have to pray, not one in which nature and its seasons are predictable.

That is part of a larger narrative. Because the terrain of Israel is such that it cannot become the base of an empire, it will constantly be at threat from larger and stronger neighbouring powers. Israel will always find itself outnumbered. It will need to rely on exceptional courage from its soldiers, and ingenuity in battle. That will take high national morale, which in turn will require



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from the people a sense of belonging to a just and inclusive society.

Commitment will be needed from every individual. They will need to feel that their cause is justified and that they are fighting for something worth preserving. So the entire configuration of the Torah's social ethics, whose guardians were the Prophets, is already implicit in the kind of geo-political entity Israel is and will be. It would always be a small and highly vulnerable country, set in a strategic location at the junction of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia. As with its agriculture, so with its battles: Israel is a people that must lift its eyes to heaven.

Future Tense, pp. 139–140

... **REFLECT:** Is this still true of the modern State of Israel?
...

THE LAND OF HOPE

Twenty-six centuries ago, in exile in Babylon, the Prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel) had the most haunting of all prophetic visions. He saw a valley of dry bones, a heap of skeletons. God asked him, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Yechezkel replied, "God, You alone know." Then the bones came together, and grew flesh and skin, and began to breathe, and live again. Then God said: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost [*avdah tikvatenu*].' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the God says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them;

I will bring you back to the land of Israel'" (Yechezkel 37:1–14).

It was this passage that Naftali Herz Imber was alluding to in 1877, when he wrote, in the song that became Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah, the phrase *od lo avdah tikvatenu*, 'Our hope is not yet lost.' Little could he have known that seventy years later one third of the Jewish people would have become, in Auschwitz and Treblinka, a valley of dry bones. Who could have been blamed for saying 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost'?

Yet, a mere three years after standing face-to-face with the angel of death, the Jewish people, by proclaiming the State of Israel, made a momentous affirmation of life, as if it had heard across the centuries the echo of God's words to Yechezkel: 'I will bring you back to the land of Israel.'

And a day will one day come when the story of Israel in modern times will speak not just to Jews, but to all who believe in the power of the human spirit as it reaches out to God, as an everlasting symbol of the victory of life over death, hope over despair. Israel has taken a barren land and made it bloom again. It has taken an ancient language, the Hebrew of the Bible, and made it speak again. It has taken the West's oldest faith and made it young again. It has taken a shattered nation and made it live again. That remains the Jewish dream. Israel is the land of hope.

Future Tense, pp. 152–153

... **REFLECT:** How do you think Israel has managed to stay hopeful in the face of so many seemingly insurmountable challenges in its short history?
...



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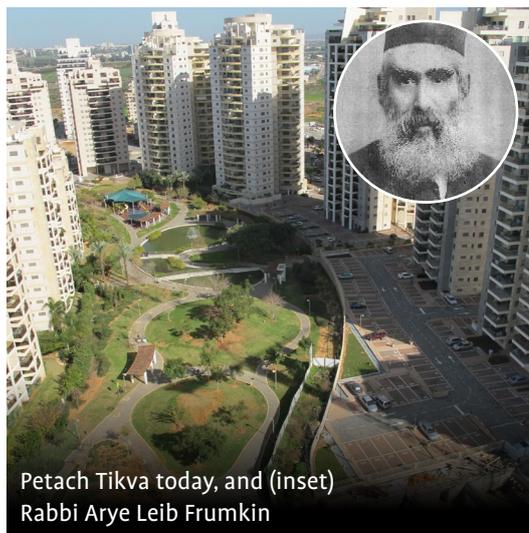
Yom Ha'atzmaut for the Young (and Young at Heart!)

It Once Happened...

A personal retelling of the story of the State of Israel in the words of Rabbi Sacks.

IN 1871 my great-grandfather, Rabbi Arye Leib Frumkin, left his home in Kelm, Lithuania, to go and live in Israel, following his father who had done so some twenty years earlier. One of his first acts was to begin writing a book, *The History of the Sages of Jerusalem*, a chronicle of the continuous Jewish presence in Jerusalem since Ramban arrived there in 1265 and began reconstructing the community that had been devastated during the Crusades.

In 1881 pogroms broke out in over a hundred towns in Russia. In 1882 the notorious antisemitic May Laws were enacted, sending millions of Jews into flight to the West. Something happened to my great-grandfather as a result of these experiences. Evidently he realised that Aliyah, going to live in Israel, was no longer a matter of a pilgrimage of the few, but a vital necessity for the many. He moved to one of the first agricultural settlements in a new *yishuv*. It had been settled some three or four years earlier, but the original farmers had contracted malaria and left. Some were now prepared to go back to work the land, but not to live there. It was, they believed, simply too much of a hazard to health.



Petach Tikva today, and (inset) Rabbi Arye Leib Frumkin

He led the return and built the first house there. When the settlers began to succeed in taming the land, they were attacked by local Arabs,

and in 1894 he decided that it was simply too dangerous to stay, and he moved to London. Eventually he returned and was buried there. On his gravestone it records that he had built the very first house.

What fascinates me is the name the settlers gave to the village. I do not know why they decided on this particular name, but I have a guess. It was set in the Yarkon Valley, and when they discovered that it was a malarial swamp, it appeared to them as a valley of trouble. But they knew the Hebrew Bible, and they recalled a verse from the Prophet Hoshea in which God promised to turn the 'valley of trouble' into a 'gateway of hope' (Hoshea 2:15). That is the name they gave the village, today the sixth largest town in Israel: Petach Tikva, the gateway of hope.

Since its establishment, Israel has done extraordinary things. It has absorbed immigrants from 103 countries, speaking 82 languages. It has turned a desolate landscape into a place of forests and fields. It has developed cutting-edge agricultural and medical techniques and created one of the world's most advanced high-tech economies. It has produced great poets and novelists, artists and sculptors, symphony orchestras, universities and research institutes. It has presided over the rebirth of the great Talmudic academies destroyed in Eastern Europe during the Holocaust. Wherever in the world there is a humanitarian disaster, Israel, if permitted, is one of the first to send aid. It has shared its technologies with other developing countries. Under immense strain, it has sustained democracy, a free press and an independent judiciary. Had my great-grandfather seen what it has achieved, he would hardly have believed it. In truth, I hardly believe it when I read Jewish history and begin to understand what Jewish life was like when there was no Israel. For me, more than anything else, Israel is living testimony to the power of Moshe's command, 'Choose life.'

Future Tense, pp. 131–132



Points to Ponder

- 1 Why do you think Rabbi Sacks' great-grandfather left Europe to live in the Land of Israel?
- 2 What do you think Rabbi Frumkin would say if he saw Petach Tikva today?
- 3 How does the modern-day city of Petach Tikva symbolise the miracle of the State of Israel?

Chidon on the Chag (A Quick Quiz)



1. What was the exact date of the establishment of the State of Israel?
2. What is the population of the State of Israel today?
3. From which country have the most Jews made Aliyah?
4. How many trees has the Jewish National Fund planted in Israel since it was founded in 1901?
a. 40 million b. 140 million c. 240 million
5. The Israeli company *Netafim*, established in 1965, is the world leader in which type of technology?
6. Which countries have more start-ups per capita than Israel?
7. What is the name of Israel's Nobel Laureate for literature?
8. Can you name Israel's nine universities?
9. How many elections has Israel had over the past two years?
10. How many companies in Israel are currently using technology to combat COVID-19?
a. More than 20 b. More than 50 c. More than 70

Educational Companion to the Questions

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rabbi Frumkin was deeply religious, and so the opportunity to live in the land of his ancestors, fulfil the parts of Judaism that can only be fulfilled in Israel, and be a key part of the process of bringing the messianic redemption, were no doubt factors in his decision. But equally, he was guided by the difficult living conditions in Eastern Europe, especially the antisemitism that Jews were facing every day. These were also the two main motivations for the majority of the Jews who moved to Israel at that time, what historians term 'The First Aliyah' (1882–1903).
2. He no doubt would struggle to recognise Petach Tikva today, a bustling western city, which in his day was a small, barely-viable agricultural settlement. We can imagine that he would feel that this was the realisation of the dreams of the first pioneers. No doubt Petach Tikva of today is beyond the wildest dreams of the early pioneers.
3. The very name Petach Tikva demonstrates the deep faith and hope the Zionist pioneers had to create a future Jewish state, against all the odds. The fact that they succeeded, and today Petach Tikva is now a bustling metropolis, is a wonderful example of the miracle of the creation and existence of the State of Israel. Modern-day Petach Tikva has a mix of religious and secular Israelis (like most cities in Israel) and this also represents two different approaches to the miracle of the State of Israel – was

this achieved by the Hand of God, or by human endeavour? It is most likely that the majority of Petach Tikva's inhabitants see it as a combination of both.

CHIDON ON THE CHAG (A QUICK QUIZ)

1. 5th Iyar 5708 / 14th May 1948.
2. 8,757,718 (at our last count).
3. Russia/Ukraine (FSU).
4. 240 million.
5. Drip irrigation (agricultural technology).
6. None. Israel has the more start-ups per capita than any other country in the world!
7. Shmuel Yosef Agnon.
8. Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology), Weizmann Institute of Science, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv University, University of Haifa, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Open University of Israel, Ariel University.
9. Four.
10. More than 70.

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