

ISRAEL TURNS 70

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YOM HA'ATZMAUT

Yom Ha'atzmaut—Israel's Independence Day (on the 5th day of Iyar)—has become an accepted, almost universally in the Jewish world, as a day of celebration and identification with the State of Israel. Jewish communities [often] mark the day with gala dinners, Israel parades, picnics, youth activities, etc...In Israel, Yom Ha'atzmaut is an official day off. In the earlier years of the State, the main celebration centered on public gathering and celebration in the streets at night, military parades in the day. Today, public Israeli rock and pop concerts in city squares and parks are more common in the evening. Most Israelis spend the day going on picnics and having BBQs, hiking and nature walking.

...Yom HaZikaron is observed on the 4th day. Memorial Day in Israel is a day of raw emotions of sorrow and loss. In Israel time has not dulled the pain and many losses are relatively new, being recalled first-hand by family and friends. It is not as much about a nation paying respect to its forbears as a day of mourning for fallen children, parents and brothers. The official “switch” from Yom HaZikaron to Yom HaAtzmaut takes place a few minutes after sundown, with a ceremony on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in which the flag is raised from half-staff (due to Yom HaZikaron) to the top of the pole. The president of Israel delivers a speech of congratulations, and soldiers representing the army, navy, and air force parade with their flags.

The message of linking these two days is clear: Israelis owe their independence—the very existence of the state—to the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for it. This sentiment is expressed movingly in Natan Alterman's poem “The Silver Platter” which is traditionally read at memorial services. Despite the strong feeling of connection between the two days in recent years, perhaps because unfortunately more and more families are joining the ranks of the bereaved, or due to a change in public sentiment and sensitivity, there have been suggestions of separating the two days. It is argued that the sudden swing from mourning to celebrations is too much for the bereaved to bear.

The Silver Platter by Nathan Alterman

by Nathan Alterman (translated by David P. Stern)

...And the land will grow still
Crimson skies dimming, misting
Slowly paling again
Over smoking frontiers
As the nation stands up
Torn at heart but existing
To receive its first wonder
In two thousand years
As the moment draws near
It will rise, darkness facing
Stand straight in the moonlight
In terror and joy...
When across from it step out
Towards it slowly pacing
In plain sight of all
A young girl and a boy
Dressed in battle gear, dirty
Shoes heavy with grime
On the path they will climb up
While their lips remain sealed
To change garb, to wipe brow
They have not yet found time
Still bone weary from days
And from nights in the field
Full of endless fatigue
And all drained of emotion
Yet the dew of their youth
Is still seen on their head
Thus like statues they stand
Stiff and still with no motion
And no sign that will show If they live or are dead
Then a nation in tears
And amazed at this matter
Will ask: who are you?
And the two will then say
With soft voice: We are the silver platter
On which the Jews' state
Was presented today
Then they fall back in darkness
As the dazed nation looks
And the rest can be found
In the history books.

Questions To Discuss

- What emotions and thoughts arise for you as you read Alterman's poem?
- Israelis choose to observe Yom Hazikaron and celebrate Yom Haatzmaut officially and personally in many different ways. How do you relate to this season of marking Israel's 70th year? How has that changed for you over time?