

Israel at 75!

“We’ve made it to 75!” says Rabbi Ammi Hirsch on Israel’s 75th Independence Day. “The Jewish state is our supreme accomplishment and the demographic center of the Jewish world. It has injected the Jewish people back into history. As challenging as these days are, history has proven that it is far better for our people to confront the political and moral dilemmas of collective power than to face powerlessness alone and at the mercy of those who seek our harm.”

This is a landmark Shabbat, *Rosh Chodesh Iyar*, the first day of the Hebrew month of Iyar. In five days Israel will be 75.

Seventy-five is old for an individual, but young for a country. The Mishna states that already by the age of 60 a person is *zaken*, elderly. *Ben shiv'im le'seiva* — by the age of 70 we have reached — *seiva*, fullness. From the Sages’ perspective, it is mostly downhill from there!

But a 75-year-old nation is pubescent. Countries are still working things out at that age. When America was 75, its population was 23 million. There were 31 states, 15 of which were slave states.

I have shared with you extensively and in detail my dissatisfaction with, and concerns about, the current state of affairs in Israel. I am dismayed by some elements of the Israeli government. Political extremism and religious fundamentalism are not normative Jewish values, and we should say so, and I will continue to do so.

But I will not reprise that critique today because this is an occasion for celebration. Who comes to a birthday party to criticize and admonish? “Here’s my gift, but before you open it, I just want to remind you again how disappointed I am in your recent behavior.” There is room for what our tradition calls *tochecha* — rebuke; it plays an important role in Judaism. But birthdays are occasions to look at the bigger picture: To step back from the disquieting daily developments that so consume us - and to reflect on the magnitude of our accomplishments, give thanks for the miracle of life, and offer gratitude for health and well-being. We seek to put the years of our lives in perspective. We rejoice on birthdays; it is why we throw parties. We are more attuned to the fragility of life. Sometimes we even weep tears of joy, remembering all the years gone by; how hard we tried to bring this fragile newborn into the world, how often things could have gone so terribly wrong, and how grateful we are that they survived to grow strong, confident, productive and self-assured.

We have made it to 75!

The enormity of this statement alone is impossible for me to fully articulate - because for me, it is not only a dispassionate intellectual assertion. My commitments, my relationships, my identity, begin with feelings - a passion of belongingness to our people. I emphasize passion because identity is first and foremost an emotional disposition. We do not generally reason ourselves into attachments. We fall in love — and then we rationalize it. If we were to rationalize love first — who would fall in love? We would see too many blemishes.

We have made it to 75! If you don’t feel it, you won’t feel it. Love, affection, commitment, identity — they start with feelings, born of our unique, individual life experiences. I fell in love with Israel as a teenager. The drama of Jewish independence inflamed my soul through daily life in Israel without my even realizing it — and there it has remained. Age cannot wither, nor events stale, my fierce ardor. But if

there is no spark to begin with, there can be no fire. No amount of Torah, mountains of sermons or rivers of words can inspire love where emotions run cold, or where a sense of betrayal runs deep, dousing the flames of once-intense passions.

I sense God's presence in the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies of restoration, words first uttered nearly three thousand years ago, that I recite to myself every time my flight circles Ben Gurion airport: *Ve'shavti et shvut ami Yisrael* — "I will restore My people Israel. They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them. They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, they shall till gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their own soil, nevermore to be uprooted."

On this day, at this season, I am filled with gratitude to the Almighty One, Who made me a Jew, and has allowed me to live in this very epoch of Jewish restoration that a hundred generations of our ancestors yearned to see, pouring out their souls in daily supplication.

"Baruch ata Adonai elohenu melech ha'olam shehechyanu ve'kimanu, ve'higianu lazman hazeh"

"Praised are You O God, Ruler of the Universe, Who has given me life, sustained me, and allowed me to reach this season."

The Jewish state is the Jewish people's supreme accomplishment of our times, and now the demographic center of the Jewish world. Israel is the primary source of our people's collective energy — the engine for the recreation and restoration of the national home and the national spirit of the Jewish people. Of all the many gifts Israel bequeaths, this is its most important achievement. Individual Jews have contributed mightily to social welfare - as individuals. The Jewish state has injected the Jewish people back into history — from passive victims acted upon, to willful participants exercising collective agency.

By all historical accounts the Jewish people shouldn't even be here. None of our ancient neighbors made it. We are the last surviving remnants of a long-lost world. All the others are fossils to be dug up, carbon-dated, and placed in museums — if their ruins can even be located. The Jews should be cherished — especially by our younger and much larger siblings who practice Christianity and Islam — and whose faiths would probably not even exist had we not survived antiquity.

As such, our existence has universal significance. Israel is a testament of hope over despair — a story of human perseverance, tenacity and resilience: Getting off the ground, rising up after being knocked down over and over again, shunning victimhood and self-pity in resolute determination to stand proud and prevail. Three years after the forces of darkness exterminated a third of our people, we rose again. The neighbors sought to strangle the newborn in its crib. Six hundred thousand Jews, many of them survivors of the infernos, clung to life against the combined assault of millions.

We are alive! The Jews have returned to the Promised Land after two millennia! If you are not overwhelmed by the miracle of this now-commonplace truth, you have not studied enough Jewish history. How many Jews were tortured and persecuted to bring us to this day! How many Jews died fighting for the revival of our people! How many Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis were killed — we will remember them on Tuesday - defending Jewish dignity and restoring our collective self-esteem.

American Jewry would be a shadow of itself without Israel. We stand proud here because our brothers and sisters stand proud there. It is true that there are many who still dislike us — and they often take

out on Israel their passive-aggressive attitude towards Jews. That will never change — we know that now. But unlike at any time in the past two millennia — today there is a price for Jew-hatred. Oppressing and killing Jews is no longer cost-free. We will defend ourselves. We will protect ourselves, and we will be assertive about it.

Remember the days when Jewish life was cheap — or have we forgotten already? When they tortured us on the crosses of the inquisition, raided Jewish villages on the steppes of the Pale, persecuted us in the lands of the crescent, incinerated us in the ovens of Europe? Remember those days? Do you remember the powerlessness, the abandonment, the loneliness, the degradation, the impoverishment, the hatred?

Do we remember those days — or is life so good for us that we no longer feel vulnerable, and can take for granted Jewish acceptance and well-being? After all, even mindful of the distressing rise of contemporary anti-Semitism — never in the whole history of the Jewish people has a country embraced its Jews as the United States. In this regard at least, America is, indeed, exceptional.

One European community at one brief moment in time came close. It was the Jews of Austria in the early 20th century. They were leading writers, poets, journalists, playwrights, intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, musicians, scientists, merchants, traders, and entrepreneurs. It was impossible to imagine Viennese culture without the Jews. Broadly speaking, they were affluent, prominent, comfortable, and largely assimilated. They felt secure in the Enlightenment's apparent embrace.

For those of you who saw Tom Stoppard's "Leopoldstadt," do you remember the last devastating act, when the Stoppard figure — a visiting Englishman named Leo Chamberlin — meets an Austrian cousin, Nathan, who survived the War? Chamberlin, whose given name was Leopold Rosenbaum, took the surname of his stepfather "in case Hitler won," his mother said. He was eight years old when he left Vienna for England, but had no recollection of his childhood in Austria. His parents worked hard to suppress any flicker of Jewish memory. Rosenbaum was gone for good, they thought. As Nathan recites the list of Chamberlin's relatives who died in the Holocaust — fervently trying to reawaken long-dormant Jewish memories, he lashes out at Chamberlin with these words — from Stoppard's perspective, the key sentence in the entire play: "You live as if without history — as if you throw no shadow behind you."

Don't live without history — as if you throw no shadow behind you.

I often chuckle when anti-Zionists accuse Israel of privilege. That is so American — and so ignorant.

Everything — every problem, domestic and international, must be filtered through the American prism of identity and race, our original sin. It is not the Zionist Jews, almost all of whom arrived in Israel penniless and fleeing persecution — but the American anti-Zionist Jews who are Jews of privilege. They live in a free country that with all its uneven past, embraces Jews and protects the Jewish community. They live as if without history — as if they throw no shadow behind them.

There is little emotional understanding of the trials, tribulations and travails of this tiny people — less than a tenth of a percent of humanity. There is little self-reflection or even empathy. These are symptoms of advanced Jewish heart disease, a calcification of the Jewish spirit. Show me one anti-Zionist Russian Jew — one anti-Zionist Ukrainian Jew — one unsafe Jew in the world who boycotts Israel. An anti-Zionist Jew, by definition, is a Jew of privilege.

It is not the critic I worry about — even if I may personally believe that their specific critique is unfair or excessive. Critics criticize because they care, they are involved and committed. It is those who either don't care — or turn against Israel, often joining our enemies - who concern me. I don't want you to end up with them. I don't want your children to end up with them. There is a long Jewish shadow behind you.

Be a critic; Israel belongs to all of us — and Jews believe in criticism and rebuke. But do not turn away — and do not be swept up in the hubris and privilege of others who attack Israel not for its policies, but for its very existence.

For those of you troubled by contemporary events in Israel, don't turn away - double down. Go to Israel. It is the only way to have a relationship. You have to see it for yourself. Breathe it. Absorb the drama and emotions. Virtual relationships don't work. See for yourself the miraculous revivification of Jewish life and dignity. Be inspired by the dedication and patriotism of the majority of Israelis who are fighting for the soul of the country. Support those who seek what you seek, and want what you want. It is the only way to sustain a relationship. Relationships are hard work. When we turn our backs; when we give up — that is when the relationship ends.

And never forget that as challenging as these days are for Israel and the world's Jews — history has proven beyond a long shadow of a doubt — that it is far better for our people to confront the political and moral dilemmas of collective power, than to face the challenges of powerlessness alone and at the mercy of those who seek our harm.

The ancient Sages who wrote the Mishna could hardly conceive of a centenarian. Thus, they taught:
"Ben me'ah ke'ilu met ve'avar u'vatel min ha'olam."

At the age of 100, a person is as one who has already died, and disappeared from the world.

But the outer limit of a human lifespan, is a mere moment in history for a people. What will Israel look like in 25 years, when it reaches its hundredth birthday?

I hope to make it to the celebrations. I expect to be there. What a glorious day that will be.

On that day, may Israel be at peace with herself and her neighbors. May she be strong and productive, and at the vanguard of human progress and social repair.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah: *"Lo yiheh misham od ul yamim ve'zaken asher lo yimaleh et yamav"*

"There shall no longer be an infant who dies young, or an elderly person who shall not live out their days. And he who dies at the age of a hundred shall still be reckoned a youth." (Isaiah 65:20)