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בס"ד

On Reciting Hallel on Israel Independence Day

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 was one of the most extraordinary events of modern times. Few events compare to it as regards inexplicability from a merely “natural” point of view. This is perhaps the unique instance of a People reclaiming its ancestral homeland after having largely been in exile from it for many centuries, in this case almost 1900 years.

Perhaps each particular in the amazing saga of modern Israel can be explained in a natural manner. But the larger picture is another story. Consider several of the numerous details:

In late 1947, the United Nations tried hard to persuade the Arabs to accept partition of Palestine into an Arab Palestinian state and a small Jewish state comprised of three non-contiguous land segments. It was widely understood that the Jewish state’s viability would depend on the good will and cooperation of its neighbors. Despite the periodic Arab massacres of the previous generation, the Jews had accepted. But the Arabs refused. Hardly a single commentator on contemporary events is on record as having thought it possible that the next year would find a vibrant Jewish state founded on a contiguous territory much larger than had been proposed.

The armies of Egypt, Syria and Jordan, plus contingents from Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon invaded from all sides with military support from several other Arab nations. How the small Israeli army – that included many recently arrived survivors of the concentration camps – was able to vanquish the vastly superior numbers and arms of its enemies was astonishing.

As Israeli leaders – deeply committed to refrain from forced expulsion – were wondering how they

could possibly cope with an Arab population larger than the Jewish one, Arab leaders made an astounding, inexplicable decision. They vigorously encouraged the Arab populace – on continuous radio broadcasts and in the press – to voluntarily depart (and return upon the supposed imminent victory). They even accused those who refused to leave of being traitors to the Arab cause. Thus, about 340,000 Arabs left Israel, greatly contributing to the viability of the new state. Reminiscing about this, President Moshe Sharett said, “A miracle happened and the Arabs fled.”

Prompt international recognition was crucial for the new state. It was truly amazing that U.S. President Harry S. Truman extended recognition minutes after Israel declared independence. Remarkably, he ignored the strong recommendation of Secretary of State George C. Marshall as well as the State Department consensus not to do so. Indeed, when Washington called the U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Warren Austin to notify him of the president’s decision a few minutes before it was announced, his response was “that’s impossible – we’re making a pitch for trusteeship at this very moment.” A member of the U.S. delegation was then addressing the General Assembly explaining why the U.S. preferred U.N. trusteeship rather than partition!

Can it be fully understood how the Arab nations, in a state of war with Israel, permitted 330,000 Jews living in their midst to emigrate to Israel during the first three years of the state? They may have had intentions of keeping Jewish property and crushing the fledgling state with masses of poor immigrants, but it turned out that they provided the new state with greatly increased strength and dynamism!

Before June 1967 it had widely been thought impossible for Israel to liberate East Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria in our times. The usually well-prepared Israel Defense Forces did not even have contingency battle plans for those areas. Experts considered it unfathomable that Jordan – who controlled those regions – even entered the war. It appears it was seduced by empty Egyptian boasts on the first day of that war of tremendous victories! Together with the conquest of the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights, at the very least these Israeli victories created a previously unimagined opportunity for peace with its neighbors.

Who could have predicted the mighty ripple effects of the Six Day War, which pierced the “Iron Curtain,” deeply stirring the Soviet Jewish community? In the first few years after that war over a quarter of a million Russian Jews were absorbed in Israel while an additional three-quarters of a million followed in succeeding years. Thus, a segment of world Jewry that had virtually been written off was redeemed while Israel was infused with vitally needed strength and skills.

However one views each detail, many of which may be interpreted as the result of great dedication, superior organizational ability, coincidence or good luck, surely the full constellation of events should be recognized by the traditional community as revealing the Almighty’s Providence. From the apparently outrageous late 19th Century decision to make the dream of a reestablished homeland a reality in a mostly barren land devoid of adequate rainfall and natural resources, through steadfastness in the face of Arab opposition, Jewish controversy, world indifference, and the crushing blows of the Holocaust, to a blooming desert, internationally recognized statehood and military victories against enormous odds, dramatically revitalizing the Jewish People around the world, the full picture defies a “natural” interpretation. This meets the halakhic criteria of a miracle and requires a halakhic commemoration.

A traditional Jewish response to national miraculous events is to recite Hallel on the commemoration day (BT *Pesahim* 117a). Thus, we recite Hallel to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt and the events of Hanukah. We would also recite Hallel on Purim

except – the Talmud informs us – that we have the Megillah to read or because the miracle occurred outside Israel or because we remained subjugated to Ahashverosh (BT *Megilla* 14a).

Given that the Land of Israel is the possession of the entire People; that oppressed Jews began emigrating to Israel; that Jews all over the world – many who had been on the verge of assimilation – began to identify with Israel; that Israel became the international center for Jewish studies and activities and a primary source of Jewish dignity; that Israel became the central focus of communal Jewish energy throughout the diaspora, the miracle was for all the Jewish People and it should be commemorated with Hallel.

Some rabbis make a distinction. Israel Independence Day, the fifth of Iyar, 1948, was not the day of deliverance from the war. The proclamation of independence escalated the war. Many lives were lost and as yet there has not truly been an end to the war. Additionally, sad to say, most members of the government and the populace are not observant of traditional Jewish Law. For these reasons, these authorities have stated that Israel Independence Day cannot be compared with the other days on which the Talmud states that Hallel is recited.

However, as the day that commemorates the Jewish People having reestablished their own government on their own land, to be concerned for the welfare of Jews all over the world and to work in the international arena for their protection; as the day the new Jewish government opened the doors to freedom for Jews everywhere, establishing a policy of granting automatic citizenship to every Jew who chooses to come and settle, thus ending the many centuries of Jewish homelessness and launching a massive Ingathering; as the day that brought most of the nations of the world to recognize a Jewish state and be more mindful of Jewish rights; and as the day that millions of Jews around the world felt revitalized and reattached themselves to the Jewish People, Independence Day is an event of great significance and happiness. It is an eminently appropriate occasion for special thanksgiving to the Almighty for His many present-day wonders and favors associated with Israel.

Thus, in the very first years of the state, the Council of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, under the leadership of

the chief rabbis of Israel, Rishon Lesion Rabbi Ben Sion Meir Hai Uziel and Rabbi Yishak Halevy Herzog, a"h, declared the appropriateness of reciting Hallel on Independence Day. However, acknowledging some distinctions from the classic cases of Hallel as explained above, it was decided to recite it without a berakha. This was also the position of our Brooklyn Sephardic community's chief rabbi, Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin, a"h.

It should be noted that in the succeeding years since 1948, as Israel was forced to war a number of times, and as on each occasion the Almighty rescued it from the danger of annihilation, the occasions for giving thanks have increased. As these wars occurred in a relatively short time span, and as each war's concluding events do not lend themselves to a clearly-defined specific commemorative day, Independence Day has become the occasion for celebrating all of modern Israel's victories.

Some Sephardic rabbis, based on a statement of the great 18th Century decisor Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai (Rab Hida) have been reciting Hallel on Independence Day but not in its usual slot, immediately after the *amida* of *shahrit*. For kabbalistic reasons, Rab Hida states that when Hallel is recited for a miracle of lesser caliber than those of the Exodus or Hanukah, it should be said at prayer's end.

Regarding this point, the former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel and Rishon Lesion Hakham Obadiah Yosef, shlita, wrote that if the congregation prefers to say Hallel on Israel Independence Day in the usual place they should not be stopped. Kabbalistic matters such as the one under discussion are only for those that understand them and keep them private (Yabia Omer v. 6, O.H. #41).

In our days, when many non-believers have denied the possibility of Divine intervention, and stubbornly insist on explaining the establishment of Israel in strictly natural terms, it would appear preferable to say Hallel in its usual place, not to give the impression that we are only reciting it as a compromise under pressure.

Regarding the day on which all Jerusalem was liberated and unified, Iyar 28, the Council of the Chief

Rabbinate of Israel, under the leadership of then chief rabbis of Israel Rishon Lesion Rabbi Yishak Nessim and Rabbi Isar Yehuda Unterman, a"h, issued a proclamation to establish recital of Hallel with a *berakha* on Yom Yerushalayim. Although Iyar 28 was the third day of the Six Day War, the Chief Rabbinate considered the reunification of Jerusalem of historic significance in itself, and as it was part of and close to the conclusion of the miraculous victory that rescued the nation from the threat of annihilation, both commemorations were combined into one. Other rabbis, however, advocated Hallel without a *berakha* on this day also.

Of course halakhic Jews are grieved at the fact that modern Israel is far from being a halakhically observant country. Perhaps we can appreciate the position of those whose sensitivity to the widespread lack of traditional observance in modern Israel does not allow them to celebrate Independence Day in any way. Perhaps we may understand the position of those who even refuse to suspend the recital of *tahanunim* for the day. However, we cannot agree with them on these matters and should not pray with a minyan that recites *tahanunim* on this day. Not commemorating a national miracle in some appropriate manner is downgrading, even disgracing the miracle and an expression of ungratefulness to the Almighty. It strengthens the views of those who wish to say there has not been a miracle. Additionally, non-commemoration increases the disunity among the Jewish people and diminishes the possibility that the non-observant will be open to dialogue and receptive to the example and teachings of the observant.

The Almighty has provided us a great opportunity. We must do our part to make modern Israel succeed on the foundation of the Torah. This requires winning over the non-observant through education, friendliness, persuasion and good example. One of the most inspiring and efficacious approaches toward nurturing national unity and stirring religious feeling is undoubtedly through recognition of the miracle of modern Israel.

The late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Rishon Lesion Ben Sion Meir Hai Uziel captured the essence of the matter in a deathbed statement broadcast live on Israel radio in 1953:

Our generation has witnessed G-d's mighty and hidden hand as He gathered our dispersed to our ancestral land and brought us to dwell as a nation on its land... The Ingathering of recent decades was a seed... At the right moment He instilled counsel and courage in the hearts of our pioneers... and gave us the land.

Note this and reflect upon it greatly: these events are a result of G-d's fulfillment of his promise through his prophets for the good of Israel and the whole world. This good is contingent on Israel fulfilling Torah and misvot, thereby sanctifying the Name of the Holy One and bringing all nations to true faith in Him, resulting in universal peace...

Study Torah and teach it to your children, fulfill its statutes properly... Particularly preserve the peace of the People and the state. Controversy and divisiveness are our most dangerous enemies; peace and unity are the foundations of the survival of the Jewish state and the source of Divine blessing and strength for the Jewish People...

Rabbi Shamah's Response to Criticism on his "Recital of Hallel on Israel Independence Day" Article

Thank you for your response to my essay regarding Hallel on Israel Independence Day.

Regarding whether the post-Declaration of Independence Israeli leadership was deeply committed not to use transfer as a tactic – you are right that we should not be simplistic or naive. There usually are varied opinions among government leaders and undoubtedly there were some episodes of armed Jewish soldiers casting fear into the Arab populace. However, despite some exceptions, it does appear to be the case that the Jewish leadership was committed not to use transfer.

Regarding whether Arab leaders called for evacuation in 1948, I think the widely held assumption that they did has not been refuted, but reinforced. Some Arabs departed at Jewish prompting but a tremendous number of them evacuated who could have remained had they chosen to. Anecdotal evidence often does not reflect the whole picture, but many who lived through the '48 events in Israel recall this situation. An elderly

neighbor of ours, a man we have always found reliable, Mr. Dweck, who was living in Netanya in '48 and who had been living there since '34, insists that the local Jews pressed the local Arab residents to remain. The Jews were friendly with many Arabs and were not interested in being cruel to them. And they did not want to be seen that way. But, he clearly recalls, the Arabs were pressed by their leaders to evacuate.

Undoubtedly, some Arabs projected unto the Jews a disposition that they themselves might have had. Surely some feared that the Jews would take revenge for the 1920, 1929 and 1936 massacres. Scholars sometimes "reconstruct" what they believe must have been the case – to some degree it appears this was done with the so-called "massacre" at Deir Yassin – and in this case there may be other motivations also at work.

In any event, Moshe Sharett's use of the word "miracle" highlights the main point I referred to, namely, that an amazing, unpredictable, unexpected solution of evacuation came out of nowhere. The lack of coordination amongst Arab leaders that you cite as cause for much of the Arab disaster strengthens this perception.

Your points that prior to '48 the Yishuv was unfavorable to Jewish immigration from Arab countries and that until today discrimination against these Jews exists – disgraceful as these realities most certainly are – do not deny the point that the "population exchange" that took place immediately upon establishment of the state was an amazing phenomenon. It came out of nowhere and provided the state viability, despite the Ashkenazic prejudice.

It is true that historians [of the secular bent] do not see a miracle or Divine providence at work. But that is the case by definition – they reject the possibility before beginning their research. They would say the same for any miracle, so we cannot rely on them for evaluation.

Through the centuries leading rabbinical figures often invoked the term "miracle" for events much less extraordinary than those under discussion. The huge, complex and unprecedented confluence of events leading to the establishment of Israel provided the Jewish world an opportunity for rejuvenation and

deserves special recognition. Regarding the point of religion, it should be borne in mind that in Judaism's perspective, peoplehood, land and religion are interrelated.

My interpretation does follow that of several extraordinary spiritual leaders, including two rabbis whose greatness was universally recognized decades before establishment of the state and who both served as chief rabbis of Israel: Bension Hai Uziel and Isaac Halevy Herzog. A relevant portion from the former's 1953 statement on the subject was included in my essay; following is a 1956 statement from Rabbi Herzog that is included in the *Tikkun Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, Jerusalem, 1962:

It is my hope regarding this miracle which was for all the Jewish people, including our Diaspora brethren – which uplifted Israel's honor in the eyes of the nations; which infused new hope in the hearts of Israel after the terrible Holocaust; which strengthened the faith; and which provides our people a shelter until the coming of the Mashiah, in case that there will be persecutions of the nation anywhere – that all will agree that it is proper to set a commemoration day to strengthen our faith... I hope these [prayers] will penetrate the hearts of the Jewish people, including those *haredim* who

stubbornly refuse to acknowledge this great miracle that G-d performed to us.

What the Jewish people have done with the opportunity presented them is another story. Had secularists had a slightly more "religious" response to events, had *haredi* elements chosen to be more receptive to the "miracle," and more forthcoming to the state and its populace, things would be very different. But we may be hopeful that the situation will change when and if peace finally comes.

By the way, population statistics do not bear you out that there was a [significant] indigenous Palestinian Arab people in Israel/Palestine prior to the Zionist movement. Careful studies of the half-century or so prior to 1948 have shown that as Jews came to settle and created economic opportunity, provided health care and raised living standards, Arabs from outside areas were attracted in great numbers. Most of the Arabs in what became Israel in 1948 – whose numbers have been wildly exaggerated – derived from other Arab lands, having arrived during the time of the increasing Jewish population. Antiquity of the Palestinian Arab communities for the most part is a modern myth created for political purposes. (See *From Time Immemorial* by Joan Peters, particularly chapters 11-12.)

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