

Israel aged for 70 years

This month is the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the modern State of Israel. April 18th starts *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*, Israeli Independence Day, and the celebrations here in Washington and around the world are sure to be impressive, with lots of blue and white flags, songs in Hebrew and plenty of *lefel*.

We sometimes have a very superficial, romanticized view of Israel. At other times, our connection is tempered by difficult news about the Jewish state and its leadership. Like a fine wine (of which there are many produced in there), Israel only gets more complex and nuanced with time. How then, can we create our own personal and family relationship with the state, land and people of Israel and experience its flavor?

A decade or two ago, many American Jews had close family members or friends living there. Many more visited Israel, and in the last 20 years, millions of young Jews from all over the world have experienced Israel through Birthright trips. All have seen Israel up close and personal, for better or worse.

Four years ago this month, I had that opportunity. I was preparing to spend the entire summer living in Jerusalem. It wasn't my first trip to Israel, but the extended stay, which would allow me to study at the Hebrew Union College in our people's most historic city. One of Israel's many fascinating features is its paradox. This ancient land, filled with history, is one of the world's leading medical and technology providers. Mere blocks from the remains of the 2nd Jewish Temple in the center of the Old City are pulsing hubs of nightlife and culture. Religious people of many backgrounds live side by side with secular Israelis. A nation that has known many wars in its brief history in an endless quest for peace.

My stay that summer was caught up in one of those wars; my third day in country, missiles from Gaza began landing in Israeli cities and towns in what would become the 2014 Gaza War. Even in Jerusalem, I occasionally had to scramble to the *miklat* (bomb shelter) when a siren suddenly sounded. Thankfully the *kipat barzel* (iron dome) intercepted most of them, though it stifled the mood that summer.

Still, I was able to soak in the beauty of a somewhat simpler life in Israel. You can't help but stop and smell the roses—fragrant bushes and shrubbery grow wild in the yards lining the street. The slogan *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish people live, usually refers to our survival despite the many adversities and tragedies we have suffered.

In Israel, though, I saw a different side to that phrase. The Jewish people aren't merely alive, in Israel, they live. Their lives, even for those who are secular, are imbued with elements of Jewishness. The Talmud speaks of those who walk, "*Daled Amot*," four yards, in the Land of Israel as having fulfilled their obligation to live in the land. Israelis walk their *Daled Amot* everyday, so many feel their religious obligations while living there are fulfilled.

That's not to say it isn't complicated. The hotly contested occupation of the West Bank and settlement activity, considered illegal by many international bodies, has also created tension within the Israeli populace as well. Difficult political, cultural and religious divides that pre-date our own in this country by decades make life even more intense. The corruption seen at the highest levels of government is for some a sign of embarrassment and failure.

Despite the prophetic desire for Israel to be an "*Ir l'Goyim*," a light unto the nations, this sort of extraordinarily ordinary is precisely what the nation's founders foresaw. They envision a modern, secularly oriented Jewish state not as a utopia, but a place where Jewish criminals would be arrested by Jewish police for acts against Jewish victims. A normal state where the people would be free to develop along natural lines. This of course was a change from the oppression of Eastern Europe, the discrimination of Central and Western Europe and the toleration as a protected *dhimmi* minority in Muslim lands.

Against this backdrop, one can go to Israel not as religious pilgrimage, but as a mirror of our own society, albeit through a middle-eastern and highly Jewish lens. One can experience its food, its beaches, its ancient sites, its struggles and its people. Israel isn't just an idealized place in our prayers; it is a living, thriving many-faceted society. In short, Israel is real.

I encourage you to explore that relationship with our brothers and sisters overseas, and as with a wine, to sniff it, swirl it, and taste all its complexity—drink it in! Whether you take a trip to discover it on your own, with a group or attend one of the many local Israel Independence Day celebrations coming up in the community. As with well-aged wine, once you've done it, you'll be glad you did and seek out more.

Cantor Adam

Contemporary Issues in Judaism

Adult Study Group Presented by Rabbi Block—meets once a month on Wednesday nights.

Do You Have to Believe in God to Be a Jew?, Wednesday, April 4

When people tell me they don't believe in God—either because they have seen no empirical evidence that God exists or because they can't rationally accept the God of the Bible and of the medieval rabbis—I understand completely. As you know I do not believe that God is an old guy in the sky. Let's discuss the place of God in Judaism.

The tentative dates for the Adult Study Group are:

May 2, & June 6. Class starts at 7:30PM.

Please RSVP to Rabbi Block: rabbiblock2@yahoo.com