

On the Path to National Revival

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*In memory of my beloved brother, Nadav Elad, of blessed memory, and with infinite longing:
Nadav Elad was a paratrooper who fell in active combat on the 18th of Menachem-Av 5761 (2001)*

Following the Passover holiday and the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the days of awe and trembling arrive: Holocaust Remembrance Day, Yom Hazikaron - the Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers, Independence Day and Jerusalem Day. These new dates have assumed their place in the modern-day history of the Jewish People in Israel, and are days that testify to the destruction of our nation and its resurrection in Zion.

The first date that we encounter is Holocaust Memorial Day. "What a mission of madness it is to attempt to individually count all the Jews who were exterminated - our entire people!" writes Rachel Auerbach in her book "On the Outskirts of the Warsaw Ghetto." Holocaust Remembrance Day presents our people with an unbearable memory challenge, for how is it possible to remember six million?

Professor Shlomo Breznitz sought to demonstrate the nightmare that this number represents, at a psychology conference in 1979. In terms characteristic to Judaism, he described how if each of the names of the six million Jews were inscribed in a book, and if this book of names were divided into sections similar to the length of the week's Torah portion, it would take no less than seventy-five years to read the Book of Names just once. A person's entire lifetime would not necessarily be long enough to read them all. At the root of this "mission of madness" as Auerbach calls it, is the demand to sanctify the lives of those of our people who were murdered by giving the inconceivable number one more name, one more story, one more person created in God's image who was defiled, by employing the immeasurable Amalek-like memory of our generation. Then Yom Hazikaron arrives, the Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers. As the evening siren pierces the air throughout the country at eight P.M., our souls delve down to uncover the stories of individuals who are no longer alive, and who, upon their death, bestowed us a land permeated with longing. "No memorial stones are needed for the righteous, their words are their memorials," (Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalim 47a) said our sages. Thus, in the burial plots of the fallen soldiers, the "nefesh" or memorial stone is usually uniform, and the story of their lives and deeds fill the country with a deep Israeli sadness over the destruction of individual lives for the sake of the rebirth of the people. Holocaust Memorial Day and Memorial Day for Israel's Fallen Soldiers are days that are filled with intense concentration and longing, which cast a shadow over the souls of those that remember. In schools, on radio and television, and wherever one goes, one will find expressions of the mitzvah of remembrance.

The soul is imbued with a sense of loss and is weighted down through one individual's story and then another. Each person and the story of their life, each person and the story of their death. In contrast with the effort of remembrance that characterizes these two memorial days, Independence Day and Jerusalem Day possess few rules and customs. It is true that on Independence Day there is a festive prayer, an impressive ceremony, a special reading and a Bible quiz. However, while on the previous evening people gathered in the streets and remembered together, what do people do when they remember independence? The celebration of Israeli independence pales in comparison to the memorial activities. We who have the privilege of living in Zion currently celebrate these days with no real content: an entire nation is occupied with Independence Day barbecues, and Jerusalem Day celebrations are barely relevant any longer to most of the Jews in the country. This is hardly surprising. The work of remembrance is familiar to us. Generations of Jewish educators and generations of Jewish existence in the Diaspora have bequeathed this to us. But we do not yet know how to celebrate independence.

"Forgetfulness has become the norm" wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*. "The Land rebuilt became a matter of routine, the land as a home was taken for granted... the miracle of Israel became a state like all states, with neither mystery nor sacrifice permeating it." Heschel wrote these words in 1967 as part of the demand for self-examination and dialogue that he expected from Diaspora Jewry and Israeli Jews. However, his main remarks at Beit Berl at that time centered on the danger resulting from a situation in which the State of Israel was well established, the danger of habituality and loss of the inner content on which the State of Israel was founded. Heschel's deep admiration of the State and its builders was mixed with concern that the profundity of independence would be lost as time went by, were it not imbued with fresh, living Jewish content of hope embodied in morality. Similarly, Heschel also warned concerning Jerusalem, "When Jerusalem was destroyed, the sages instituted a rule that a person should remember Jerusalem every day and everywhere ... Now that our feet are standing in Jerusalem, what great deed is incumbent upon us at this hour?"

The new Jewish holidays require us to strive to see them as a single unit: a layer of pain aside a layer of rebirth, which have been placed between Passover and Shavuot for good reason. On Passover we embrace freedom, we speak of the exodus and the pain of exile and retell the story from generation to generation, whereas the days marking the rebirth of Israel are set after the Passover holiday, as we initially speak of the exodus to freedom and now approach the Shavuot holiday. The period between Passover and Shavuot leads us to an understanding that we are a people that remembers the past in Egypt, while we face forward toward the Land of Israel and its harvest. For undocumented freedom is due to eventually disintegrate and be lost. From the Jewish freedom characterizing Passover we are led to the Shavuot holiday, as developed by the Jewish sages, as a spiritual harvest festival, a time marking the receiving of the Torah and renewal of the covenant.

“The return to Zion is a creative challenge for the permanent, a shake to the lack of movement, challenging us to a new way of thought and to new action” wrote Heschel. “Well-meaning people used to say that the Jewish state would be an answer to all Jewish questions, however, the State of Israel is actually a challenge to all our answers.” The gradual revelation of the weakness of Independence Day and Jerusalem Day reflects more than anything else the challenge that the rebirth of Israel poses for the Jewish people, and the fact that we face only the beginning of the challenge. Now that seventy years have passed since the founding of the State of Israel, the Jewish people must take stock as they approach the new holidays, and ask themselves: What is the meaning of Jewish sovereignty? What is its purpose? What did the prophets envision for their people and for all of humankind as Zion arose from within its ruins in their imagination? What will be required from us to elevate the State of Israel and Jerusalem above our highest joy? Where is the Zion that is hiding behind the State of Israel? Where is the heavenly Jerusalem that is hiding behind the earthly Jerusalem? And how will we interpret their meanings and manifest them here for our children and for our grandchildren?

We must be extremely careful, lest the days of remembrance devour the days of rebirth. The real challenge of Zionism is to emerge from the challenges of exile and from the ability to remember, and to also clear a path between the challenges of sovereignty by imbuing the days of rebirth with meaning of their own, arising from their own ability to innovate. The ability to innovate lies within the dialogue between individuals, in the dialogue of diverse communities with each other and with the joy that arises from the multiplicity of opinions all converging in one homeland through the many gates of the Land and of Jerusalem. Only through renewal of the spiritual life of our people, only through the renewal of Judaism, will this building be filled with the content required for its existence, will validity be granted to the Zionist enterprise and will Israel be lead to the deciphering of peace. Only these will foster the intent and concentration required to fill Independence Day and Jerusalem Day with a vision, a mission and sustaining content.

May it be Your wish that not a single soul of Israel shall be forgotten, neither from the dead nor from the living. And may it be Your wish that we shall not be ashamed on our days of joy forever and ever. “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.” Psalms 126:2.

יהי רצון שלא תישכח נפש אחת מישראל, לא מן המתים ולא מן החיים. ויהי רצון שלא נבוש בימי שמחתנו לעולם ועד. “אֶזְרָא יִמְלֵא שְׂחוֹק פִּינוּ וּלְשׁוֹנֵינוּ רִנָּה.” (תהלים קכו, ב).

This article translated from the original Hebrew and based upon an essay "בנתיב מלאכת הקוממיות" written by Rabbi Tamar Elad Appelbaum, the spiritual leader of Kehilat Zion in Jerusalem.