

Thoughts on Yom HaZikaron and Yom Ha'Atzmaut

*By Rabbi Robert Scheinberg
United Synagogue of Hoboken*

Tonight begins Israel's Memorial Day (Yom HaZikaron) - the day to remember those who have fallen in Israel's wars, as well as victims of terror. And then, tomorrow evening begins Yom Ha'Atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day. The somber remembrances give way to joyous celebration -- but of course the remembrances linger in the background of the celebration. Such is the intertwining of bitter and sweet that is a characteristic of Jewish history, and especially a characteristic of Israeli life today.

Those of us who have spent Yom HaShoah and/or Yom HaZikaron in Israel know that one of the observances for these days is a remarkably powerful nation-wide moment of silence. On the morning of Yom Ha-Shoah, and in the evening and morning of Yom HaZikaron, at a pre-arranged time, sirens sound, all around Israel, and the country comes to a halt. Pedestrians stop wherever they are on the street, cars stop and their drivers get out of the cars, classes and workplaces halt, as everyone stands for two minutes of silence. It's a simple and powerful ritual that communicates how almost every Jewish family in Israel has been touched by the horrors of the Shoah and wounded by the impact of Israel's conflicts.

I have pasted below some thoughts that I shared with the community at a previous Yom Ha'Atzmaut, which continue to express why it is a priority for American Jewish communities like ours to nurture a strong relationship with Israel. In addition to the many people in our Hoboken Jewish community who are in Israel, there are many of us who make an effort to visit Israel periodically or frequently, and there are a few members of our community who are in the process of making aliyah and relocating to Israel.

I have always been moved by the words of Naomi Shemer's Israeli song, *Anachnu shneinu me-oto ha-kfar*, "You and I came from the same village." The song is narrated by a young man, addressed to his dear childhood friend. He talks about how they were the same height, had similar hairstyles, used the same slang expressions, and even dated the same girls. But then, while serving together in the Israeli Defense Forces (presumably in the Yom Kippur War in 1973), the friend was killed in battle.

This is Israel's classic "There but for the grace of G-d go I" song. The surviving friend realizes how easy it would have been for it all to have happened the other way, for him to have died and for his friend to have survived.

As Israel approaches its anniversary, I am sometimes asked, by Jews and non-Jews, why I, as an American Jew, am so closely connected to Israel. Of course, my response is multi-faceted. Israel is the land where my people and my tradition were born, and it is the focal point for the world-wide Jewish community. Israel is a refuge for Jews in need, a family reunion and homecoming, a beacon for the revitalization of Jewish culture, and an effort to put Jewish ideals and values into action on a national scale.

But my response to this question usually begins with Naomi Shemer's song. I am connected to Israel because "anachnu shneinu me-oto ha-kfar." American Jews and Israeli Jews – we're from the same village. I think about my own family. My great-grandmother, who emigrated from Poland to the United States, had at least three brothers and sisters. Two of her sisters managed to settle in Palestine, where they raised their families. And one brother remained in Poland, and he and his family died in the Shoah. Just one decision, made in the year 1912, is what led to my being born in the United States and my cousins being born in Israel, instead of the other way around. Just as one fateful decision in 1912 led to my family thriving here today, and my cousins' families thriving in Israel today, and my great-great-aunts and uncles' families being wiped out, instead of the other way around.

Anachnu shneinu me-oto ha-kfar. We are from the same village. Whether we go back two thousand years, or one hundred years, we came from the same small town, even the same family. Our similarities and kinship will always bind us together. The story of your family may be similar to mine, and if not, then it is likely to be the story of the family of someone close to you.

This connection is part of what keeps me celebrating Israel's achievements, commiserating with Israel's tragedies, and dreaming Israel's dreams. As the prophet Isaiah said, "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her. Join in her jubilation, all you who once mourned over her." (Isaiah 66:10)