

Recognizing the Sacred in History

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On every day in the life of any living being,
The earth and her creatures stir to their rhythms,
The planet whirls past darkness,
Night gives way to light,
Petals and leaves gather in the sun,
Forests exhale oxygen,
Gravity keeps us from floating away,
And the moon tugs at the ocean.¹

But certain days set themselves apart.
Certain days, like gates, that you passed through once,
Shining hoops you leapt through
While riding life's cycle.

Your birthday, for example...
National heroes have days,
There are days for battles, too,
Commemorated with picnics,
in the twilight's last gleaming.

Some days, religious holidays,
like anchors, were sunk deep in ancient seas,
the abyss of memory,
their touch-point so engulfed in darkness,
their chain so encrusted with myth,
that celebrants on the ship of today
have hardly an inkling of what it all really means,
something to do with hope,
rebirth,
ingathering.

What makes any day holier than the next?
Sabbath loftier than Sunday...

¹ Based on children's book "On the Day You Were Born"

Would *Kol Nidre*, if it had been sung last Tuesday,
Have the same resonance as tonight?

What does it take to make a day holy?

Is it agriculture and season?

We have some of those days:

Tu B'Shvat. Shavuot.

What does it take to make a day especially blessed?

Decrees from Holy Books?

We have some of those: tonight, for instance.

What does it take to make generation after generation
Feel compelled to sanctify a day with wine and worship?

Is the holiness of a day, perhaps,

Measured in the amount of blood that was shed upon it?

Tisha B'Av comes to mind...

Is the holiness of a day, perhaps,

Measured by the tears that coursed into streamlets, then rivers,

And washed the tragedies of that time

Like layers of polished agate.

Imagine for a moment

What it must mean to be there,

at the origin of tradition,

At the very touch point in history,

When a day becomes blessed...

We *are* living that day

No less than

The followers of Matthatius,

No less than the maidens of Esther,

No less than the children born to emancipated Israelites

In the wilderness of Sinai.

Only we are so close to history,

We don't recognize it...

There are two holy days in our calendar
That are so young,
That we grapple as a people with what to do with them.
And yet,
They may very well be
The most essential
Days of all.

We think of *Kol Nidre* that way.
As the most essential day.

So it might seem strange on this day
To talk about *Yom HaShoah*,
Holocaust Remembrance Day,
And *Yom Ha'Atzmaut*,
Israel Independence Day,
Both of which occur in the spring.

Yom HaShoah falls five days after
The end of Passover.
Yom HaAtzmaut is eight days after that.

But I believe that the fact that
World-wide Jewry grapples
With what to do with these days,
Symbolizes something deeper,
Something we need to address
Individually and as a community.

Those days don't bring the droves
That *Kol Nidre* commands,
There isn't an opportunity
For us to talk
On a large-scale
About the significance of these days.

We are here,
At the very touch point in history,
The anchor being sunk into the sea,

But not yet landed.

It is an extraordinary place to be,
And I want us to recognize it.

Nearly two thousand years ago,
Our rabbis struggled over what to do with *Hanukkah*.
The real story was so bloody,
Killing each other in the name of Torah.
The rabbis wrestled with what our tradition would look like
If these tales of murder and martyrdom
Were recounted every year to our children
Instead, they invented a tale about an oil lamp
And turned a story of revolt, zealotry and civil war
Into a story of re-dedication, religious pluralism and hope.

What will our descendent invent
To understand these two days?
Will the songs be haunting, or jubilant?
Will they reenact the stories of our parents
And grandparents?

Every holy day in our calendar
Challenges us to consider the world from different angles.
At this time of the year
We all gather together,
And in unison we ask, "Who will live?
Who will die?"

On *Yom HaShoah*,
Our descendents may one day gather
And in unison raise up the challenge,
"Why did some live?
Why did some die?"

At Passover we say,
"Remember we were slaves in the land of Egypt."

On *Yom HaShoah* our descendents may one day gather
And say, "Remember we were butchered in the land of Europe,"

And using this as a new cornerstone,
They may build a new kind of spiritual sanctuary
To all victims, to all who were ever afraid.

And eight days later,
Eight Days after *Yom HaShoah*,
Comes *Yom HaAtzmaut*.

What will those eight days look like in the future...
Like the eight days of Sukkot?
Like the eight days of Hanukkah?
Like the eight days of Passover?
Like the ten days of repentance?

I can imagine these days
As the eight days of Aliya,
The eight days of ascent,
Toward the remarkable realization:
“Despair is not man’s last word.
Hiddenness is not God’s last act.”²

So what is *Yom HaAtzmaut*?
Is it a religious or a secular holiday?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel
Might say it’s an irrelevant question.
He wrote:

“In Judaism there *is* no absolute bifurcation
of the secular and the religious,
of the concrete and the spiritual,
of the common and the marvelous.
The spiritual is not the antithesis of the material.
Both aspects are interrelated.
We must seek...
to sanctify the common,
to sense the marvelous in everydayness...”

² Israel, An Echo of Eternity, Abraham Joshua Heschel

“The Hebrew Bible is not a book about heaven,
it is a book about the earth.”

Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day,³
Is so young,
That there is no ritual accepted by all Jews.
It is not a day of fasting,
Nor is it a day where there are symbolic foods.

Lighting memorial candles,
Reciting kaddish,
Are customs, not commandments.⁴

Communities have *Yom HaShoah* programs
Inviting a survivor or descendant
To share their story.

One rabbi tried to institute a day of silence on *Yom HaShoah*
As a theological rebuke of God.

The Reform movement tried to create a liturgy.⁵

In Israel, at ten a.m., air-raid sirens are sounded
Throughout the land for two minutes
During which time
The country comes to a standstill
In tribute to the dead.

The Ultra-Orthodox in Israel

³ Inaugurated in 1951

⁴ The Armenian world has Genocide Remembrance Day, on which all stores are closed around the world, hundreds of thousands lay flowers at the memorial in the capital of Armenia, and it is a day of church and remembrance. But the Jewish world has yet to establish its ritual about *Yom HaShoah*.

⁵ The Conservative movement created a special *megillah*, a scroll which concludes with the words: *Do not mourn too much, but do not sink into the forgetfulness of apathy. Do not allow days of darkness to return; weep, but wipe the tears away. Do not absolve and do not exonerate, do not attempt to understand. Learn to live without an answer. Through our blood, live!*

Don't believe the Holocaust should be commemorated
So close to Passover,
The flowering of our redemption,
A time of joy.⁶

Instead, they fold Holocaust into *Tisha B'Av*
And therefore don't stop when the siren sounds in Israel...

What does it take to sanctify a day?
Purim commemorates the day that genocide was thwarted.
If holiness is measured in innocent blood spilt,
Surely the most extensive genocide humankind
Has ever enacted merits a day with specific ritual...

There are many
Who protest any religious overtones to *Yom HaShoah*.
A group, 'Sons and Daughters of Holocaust Survivors,'
Wrote that the day must remain a secular
commemoration of our martyrs...
and a secular tribute to those who survived.

To say that it is a religious holiday,
Rather than a secular commemorative day,
For some suggests that God played a role.
It raises the question, perhaps,
Does God's absence count as God's acting in history.
Is God's inaction as profound a statement
As God's hand making miracles?
Is the eclipse of God during the Holocaust
As notable as God's making Godself known at Sinai?⁷

What does the fact of the Holocaust mean to you?
How does it drive you to act in the world?

⁶ How can you move from the bliss of God-given freedom, and in the same week, experience a theological eclipse, when God seems to disappear from history?

⁷ What does it take to sanctify a day? Is it God? No one would call Purim is a secular holiday, and God is not mentioned at all, not once in the entire scroll of Esther. Victory is attributed to human strategy, not Divine intervention.

Do you consider
Yom HaShoah a holy day?
It would be an interesting conversation for you to have.
If you were the rabbis
Charged with creating the Jewish ritual observance
For this day,
What would it look like?

World Jewry wrestles similarly with
Yom HaAtzmaut,
Israel Independence Day.

For many,
It is not much more than an Israeli Fourth of July.
We mimic Israeli culture
With falafel, Israeli music, dancing, parades...
It is a celebration of Israeli secular life.

There are long-standing debates over whether or not
To recite *Hallel*, the psalms of praise and gratitude
That are recited on other holy days.
Some argue yes.
They say:
How can we deny the religious significance of the day?
That following the destruction of the second Temple
Our people hoped and prayed for two thousand years to return to Israel
And those prayers were answered.

How can we deny that words from the ancient psalms,
“Thy enemies say: Come let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more!”
Came to life in 67 when the
Syrians, Egyptians, Jordanians, Iraqis,
Algerians and Saudi Arabians,
combined for a war of extermination?
What other evidence can there be of God working in history?

Strengthening the David-like band of displaced Jews
Against a Goliath multi-national army.

Who can fail to sense the glory
In the reality of a people restored,
Of a people regaining its dignity,
After having been defamed and marked for destruction?⁸

Of course we should recite *Hallel* on *Yom HaAtzmaut*.
Of course it is a religious holiday,

But interestingly,
most Israelis don't see the creation of the state
As a religious event.⁹
The popular song
Yitzchak Rabin was singing
When he was assassinated
By a Jewish fanatic
Was a song written from the perspective
Of dead soldiers,
The lyrics, folded in his pocket,
Were splattered with his blood,

It was an anti-religious song,
Calling us to take steps toward peace,
Rather than spend time whispering useless prayers...

T'nu lashemesh la'a lot,
[The lyrics read]
Let the sun rise
The purest of prayers will not bring us back...
Songs of *Hallel* won't help.

Lachen rak shiru shir lashalom...
So just sing a song for peace,

⁸ Find reference...German prayerbook?

⁹ A popular Hanukkah song still sung in Israel proclaims, "No miracle befell us, no cruse of oil did we find..." In other words, no, it was not God, and there were no miracles...it was the work of our hands. It was our own blood, sweat and tears that rebuilt this nation, that fought off a sea of nations who wanted to annihilate us. We did that with our breath and body, and don't you dare say it was God.

Don't whisper a prayer,
Sing a song for peace
In a loud shout.

Even the Orthodox are divided
About the connection between God and the
Establishment of Israel,
Some see it as the dawn of messianic days,
While others think that we weren't ready,
Israel wasn't supposed to be pioneered by
Secular teenagers
In shorts and halter tops.

And part of the reason *we* struggle with what to do
On *Yom HaAtzmaut*
Is in large part because we struggle
With our relationship with Israel.

We struggle with the question
Of what kind of relationship should we,
Modern Jewish Americans,
Have with Israel?
We struggle to answer that question,
Or perhaps,
We try to ignore it all together,
Wanting not to identify with Israel
When the media is boiling
Over the Flotillas,
Or the announcement to expand Jewish settlements
In Arab East Jerusalem
While our Vice President is visiting.

“The election of a left-leaning or right-leaning government can and does affect [our] support for the Jewish state...As our Reform Movement is constantly struggling for the rights and respect it deserves, it is hard to see Israel as the spiritual center that we hope it can be.”¹⁰

But it is a mistake to ignore it,

¹⁰ Rabbi Joel Simonds

Even when the wrestling is hard...¹¹

There is such a phenomena of brilliance
In Israel,
In medicine,
Water and solar technology,
Counter-terrorism,
Telecommunications,
High-tech...

And there are also women being arrested
for worshiping at the Wall,
Blockades and checkpoints,
Sex-trafficking,
Curfews,
concrete canopies built over
schools in the south
To protect kids from Gazan rockets.

What does the fact of Israel mean to you?

I'm not going to tell you what it should mean.
Although I know what it means to me.
I know that all of the threads of my life
Are in some way
Intertwined into the tapestry of Israel,
I know that I am incomplete without her.
I know that much of what I know
About love, community, outreach,
Courage, ingenuity and hope is
Because Israel taught me.

If I am a compass, Israel's my due North.

If I'm a bird in winter, Israel's my destination South.

¹¹ Peter Beinart wrote in his now famous essay: Many of Israel's founders believed that with statehood, Jews would rightly be judged on the way they treated the non-Jews living under their dominion. "For the first time we shall be the majority living with a minority," [a] Knesset member...declared... "and we shall be called upon to provide an example and prove how Jews live with a minority." But the message of the American Jewish establishment...is exactly the opposite: since Jews are history's permanent victims, always on the knife-edge of extinction, moral responsibility is a luxury Israel does not have.

If I'm at evening prayer, Israel is why I face East.
And if I'm a silver screen, Israel is my Mae West.

We will have debates about Israel.
We will disagree.
No rabbi can say anything about Israel
Without getting a flurry of unnerved responses.
Henry Kissinger once said:
"The great tragedies in history occur
Not when right confronts wrong,
but when two rights confront each other."

Temple's role is
Not to tell you how to feel,
But to provide a safe space
to share your views,
a place of mutual respect.
We will continue to bring speakers,
presenters and opportunities
to widen your understanding...

The only thing we do ask of you
In order to deepen the conversation,
Is that you come with us to Israel.
That you visit the land.
There is no other way
To have a fully rounded conversation
About our relationship with Israel
Than to have gone.
And we are all going.
We are planning a congregation-wide trip to Israel,
Which the four of us,
Rabbi Kellner,
Rabbi Frimmer,
Cantor Kent and myself will all lead,
With multiple tracks,
Whether you've been there before
Or never been there at all,
Come with us in 2012.
Two years to plan your budgets,

We will set up a financial plan with you if you'd like.
We'd like to make sure that everyone who wants to go can go,
And if you have the ability to help those who can't afford to,
Please speak with me.

Do you consider
Yom HaAtzmaut a holy day?
It would be an interesting conversation for you to have.
If you were the rabbis
Charged with creating the Jewish ritual observance
For this day,
What would it look like?

When we consider our observance
Or lack of observance
Of *Yom HaShoah*,
We are really considering the questions:
 What is my relationship with history?
 What is my relationship with the God of history?

And when we consider our observance
Or lack of observance
Of *Yom HaAtzmaut*,
Eight days later,
We are really considering the question:
 What is my relationship with Israel as a modern Jew,

We should not ignore these questions.
I believe it is a grave mistake to ignore these questions.

The universe may be complete,
But the greater masterpiece still undone,
still in the process of being created is history.¹²
And you are its partner.
We are its partner.

On *Yom HaShoah*,

¹² Heschel

You might come to synagogue,
Listen to a survivor or the child of a survivor
Share their story.
You might light a memorial candle.
Observe a period of silence,
Or you might wake up and forget
About it all together.
But this year on *Yom HaShoah*,
You will receive an email from us
With information about The Jewish World Watch,
An organization with which Isaiah has been involved
From the beginning,
Which combats genocide
And other egregious violations of human rights
With specific action steps you can take.

And eight days later,
on *Yom HaAtzmaut*,
You might wear blue and white,
Attend a parade,
Come to the temple to sing and dance,
You might recite *Hallel*,
Sing *HaTikvah*,
Or you might wake up and forget
That it is *Yom HaAtzmaut* entirely,
But this year on *Yom HaAtzmaut*
Every member of this congregation
Will receive a phone call,
History knocking on the door,
Asking you if you plan to join us
On our 2012 congregational trip to Israel.
I hope you say yes.
This *Yom HaAtzmaut*
Will be the continuation
Of Temple Isaiah's commitment
To wrestling, learning,
Strengthening, supporting...
To listening to the stories,
To asking the questions,
To gathering in with our own eyes,

Hearts, minds...

What makes a day holy?
Maybe just waking up in the morning,
and then going to sleep that night without having hurt anyone.
Or based on Ralph Waldo Emerson's words:

Maybe just to have laughed,
Won a little respect,
Comforted someone,
Found the best in others,
Planted a garden patch,
Taken a small step to redeem
a social condition,¹³

maybe that, in the end, is a holy day,
maybe that's a day
during which we can sense God
working in history,
through our very own hands.

This year,
Pay special attention to those particular days
That pin the year into place,
How will the ancient rituals speak to you,
And what new rituals will you create?
And when Passover rolls around,
And you end your seder with the proclamation,
"Next year in Jerusalem,"
Know that in a few short weeks,
Eight days after *Yom HaShoah*,
You will be offered the opportunity
To answer history's knock,
To open the door
And say yes.

¹³ Based on poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson