

# Yom Ha'atzmaut

- Yonatan Kohn. RIETS Semicha Student

## VERY PERCEPTIVE AND DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE OF YOM HAATZMAUT

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by Yonatan Kohn

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As a child attending Jewish day school in suburban Chicago, I never looked forward to Yom HaAtzmaut. Don't get me wrong. It's not like the mention of the day brought about some kind of severe reaction or that I anticipated the day with particular dread. It was simply one of those things that came and went without profound meaning.

The rituals of the day remain forever branded into my memory. There was the mandatory flag costume- a standard white polo shirt and uncomfortable, stiff navy blue Shabbat pants. We convened for a large communal tefillah, enhanced with the recitation of Hallel and sometimes even with the chanting of a haftarah (taken from Isaiah 10:32-12:6). The school served the traditional falafel hot lunch, a treat for some and a punishment for the rest of us. (Call me anti-Zionist, but to this day I have no taste for the greasy Mediterranean classic, adorned with tomato and cucumber bits and dripping with white substances.) And who could forget the assemblies, featuring Israeli dances, flag-waving, and the singing of Israeli songs? I don't blame the school's noble and richly sensory program, but I never "got it." Other than magically transporting me to a mystical land 6000 miles away, on the other side of the Mediterranean, what could I understand? With all of the fanfare, with the lyrics of Bab El Wad and Machar still echoing in my head, I wouldn't claim that I learned a great deal about the spirit of the day.

In high school, even these barest and most fundamental elements of the holiday peeled away. Only a minority of the students were driven to dress in kachol velavan (blue and white). Nothing shocked me more than the behavior of the most Zionistic student in the school, an Israeli with aspirations to join Israel's Air Force. And on Yom HaAtzmaut, he had the audacity to wear brown dress pants. I was sure that he had forgotten the most basic tenets of Jewish faith. As for Israeli dancing, my high school did not realize that the hora was a ritual part of the day's observance. The rosh yeshiva, (head of school) an Israeli and a veteran chaplain of the IDF, was apparently never told of its roots in the Talmud.

Imagine my astonishment when I actually began to spend Yom HaAtzmaut in Israel. I discovered what every real Israeli knows, that Yom HaAtzmaut is actually Hebrew for "Day of the Barbecue." So with throngs and hordes of my Israeli brethren, my wife and I packed our children into a van and drove out to the bowels of a public park, searching desperately for a

roomy and comfortable spot to set up the sacred barbecue. Here, in Israel, we were celebrating Yom HaAtzmaut, but the people around us were dressed for the beach and chomping on meat. Where was the falafel? But I was haunted by the thought that, stripped down to a grill and a public park, how could I be sure that it wasn't Cinco de Mayo or the 4th of July?

I was surrounded by a colorfully wide assortment of the Children of Israel, enjoying and celebrating the opportunity to live in the land inhabited by their ancestors. And then I, still dressed in my blue and white, experienced what I would have never been able to truly understand with all the finest falafel and all the assemblies that Jewish day schools could ever offer me. I found meaning in being able to witness the people's return to a place from which they had been so shamefully and painfully exiled thousands of years earlier.

Although the Jewish people never completely disappeared from the land of Israel, the masses were ushered out by conquerors and enslavement, poverty and famine, over thousands of years. In symbolically fulfilling the exhortations of the prophet Jeremiah (29:4-7), they built homes, settled, planted gardens, married, built families, and invested in the interests of their host countries. But they never forgot or forsook their ancestral homeland, ever moaning for the security and comfort that only home can provide. They cried, "How can we sing the song of G-d in a foreign land" (Psalms 137:4)? And those heartfelt, moving Israeli songs never quite found real meaning on other soil.

But today, we have begun to sing the song of Zion in our own land. We began returning long before 1948; and although most of us are still abroad, people are still returning every day. Today, it is the slowly churning process of coming home that inspires me on Yom HaAtzmaut. It is an appreciation to G-d for having provided the present, and it is a sense of hope and optimism for the prospects of the future. As such, for me on Israel Independence Day, the prayers said assume fresh meaning; and, to my delight, the memories of hummus and tehinah fade even a little more.

Yonatan Kohn is currently finishing his rabbinic studies at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, an affiliate of Yeshiva University ([www.riets.edu](http://www.riets.edu)) at its campus in Jerusalem, Israel. He is also teaching at Shaalvim for Women, a local seminary for post-high school students, and serving as Israel liaison for the recent graduates of the Maimonides School in Brookline, Massachusetts. Yonatan and his wife made aliyah in 2004, and they live with their children in Jerusalem.