

# Weekend Reads

- Israel at 75 -

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**Forward**

**News**

# ‘A new phase of Zionism’: Young U.S. Jews celebrate an ‘alternative’ Israeli Independence Day

By Arno Rosenfeld

TEL AVIV — For some young American Jews in Israel, celebrating Israel’s 75th birthday meant finding a different kind of party — one that reflected a more complicated understanding of the nation than what they had been taught growing up in American synagogues.

Many in Tel Aviv gravitated toward what organizers called an “alternative” celebration of Israeli Independence Day, which doubled as a protest against the government, and contrasted with the official festivities in Jerusalem. A multigenerational crowd streamed down Rothschild Street, with older Israelis carrying large flags wrapped around poles as smiling children chased each other with inflatable blue and white hammers.

Tens of thousands of people would end up on Kaplan Street, where for more than four months Israelis have gathered to decry a judicial overhaul plan they fear would hobble checks on the right-wing lawmakers now in power. The crowd chanted “demokratiya,” Hebrew for democracy, and

unfurled a huge banner that read “torch of democracy.”

Dodging children spraying silly string and foam in a public square near Kaplan Street, Josh Drill recalled his first Yom Ha’atzmaut, Hebrew for Independence Day, in Israel eight years ago. He had just finished high school and moved from New Jersey to join the Israeli army.

“I grew up on a one-sided narrative,” Drill said, as evening pushed passed midnight and younger people began to dominate the crowd. “The education we received was one of Israel being a Disneyland.”

Drill, 26, a student at Tel Aviv University, described a long road to arrive at the protests, including a stint in a special forces unit protecting Israeli settlers in Hebron, that pushed him to become more active in politics. As he marked the holiday with new Israeli friends, he finally felt a part of the society.

“Tonight it feels much different,” said Drill. “It’s not just that we’re celebrating — we’re fighting for independence right now.”

A few blocks from the plaza where Drill recounted his journey from Jewish day school student to Israeli army soldier to anti-government street protester, Shanie Reichman, 27, made her way from Kaplan Street to a party full of American Jews behind an apartment building near Carmel Market, Tel Aviv’s famous shuk. A DJ spun tunes under a tent ringed with Israeli flags.

This was Reichman’s first Independence Day in Israel, but she grew up celebrating the holiday with yeshiva classmates in Great Neck on Long Island. Those events were always uncritical celebrations of Israel. “It was always a big celebration of Israel without any particular message,” she said, “which is perhaps what it was supposed to be.”

Those festivities resonated with Reichman, who has her grandfather’s copy of Israel’s Declaration of Independence hanging on her wall at home, but she said they no longer felt like enough. After the protests began, Reichman, who lives in New York City and runs a young professionals program for the center-left Israel Policy Forum, knew she wanted to be in Israel to celebrate with Israelis this year.

“Israelis are calling on us — in what feels like the first time for young people — and asking, ‘Where are you? How are you not here protesting with us?’” said Reichman, who had an Israeli flag tied around her neck like a cape. “And they were right.”

For some young Jews who traveled to Israel from the United States, coming out on Tuesday night was a way of restoring their

faith in the Jewish state. Zach Schaffer, 29, who lives in Brooklyn, despaired for Israel’s future after its November elections, which saw Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu return to power alongside far-right extremists who had never before been invited to join an Israeli government..

The massive anti-government protests — which by some estimates have brought about 20% of Israelis to the streets in total, surprised him, but he felt pulled to join them. Schaffer, who works in the Reform movement, said this is his fourth trip to Israel since the election and that he had joined in the protests alongside members of the World Zionist Congress and Jewish Federations of North America conference over the last few days.

“I’ve never felt more connected to the people and the country,” he said. “This feels like a new phase of Zionism.”

*Front cover (left to right, clockwise): Photos by AFP via Getty Images, Forward archives, Jack Guez/AFP via Getty Images, and courtesy of Yousef Bashir.*

# ‘The first thing I did was kiss the ground:’ Readers write about their first trips to Israel

By Matthew Litman

Natalie Baff prayed at the Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock during her first trip to Israel.

While staying at Kibbutz Sde Boker, Hallie Segal shook David Ben-Gurion’s hand.

When Van Wallach visited Israel for the first time in 1982, he wrote about it for the Forward.

To mark Israel’s 75th anniversary, Forward readers submitted memories and photographs of their first trips to Israel. They recalled the excitement of exploring a new place, moving interactions with locals and feeling an immediate sense of belonging.

And they also remembered the difficulty of encountering Israel in times of war, or leaving an idyllic trip only to return home to news of new conflict.

In its 75 years, Israel has meant many things to many people. These stories help illustrate that breadth.

*The following has been edited for length and clarity.*

**‘I couldn’t have ever imagined something like this’**

I was 16, in 1951. I stayed with my Onkel Paul and Tante Frieda, my mother’s older sister. They had bought a small apartment on HaYarkon Street, across from a deserted stretch of beach, long before all the big hotel developments. I spent three delightful summer months in my cousin Esther’s bedroom while she was serving in the army.

I befriended three girls my age. They took me to the parks, tennis courts and beach, and I marveled at their mastery of English. One of the girls, Karin, has remained a friend. We keep in touch, though she reproaches me for not having come back to Israel since 1971. She’s right, a visit is long overdue. But I’m sure I wouldn’t recognize it now.

**—Éliane Orléans Gerstein**

It was 1994, I was 9 years old, and we were on a very American tour. I remember at an archaeological dig at Beit Guvrin-Maresha National Park, feeling that I, a child, was honored with participating in something very

important. I had been charged with excavating literal pieces of our history.

### **—Ilana Goldberg Block**

It was 1962, and I went to Israel on a teen tour of Europe. It was a fledgling country trying to catch up. The streets were narrow, most of the cars were old. We traveled the country and saw the start of the building of Be'er-Sheva, where we stayed at a new motel with a pool and air conditioning. There was a feeling of enthusiasm wherever we went, that this new country had a future — probably not an easy one, but one that its people were willing to attempt.

### **—Joy Pollock**

I went on a USY Israel Pilgrimage when I was 16, during the summer of 1975. While we were staying in downtown Jerusalem, a bomb exploded on the street right in front of our hotel. We were not in the hotel at the moment of the explosion, thank goodness. My room was on the second floor, and our balcony was blown to bits, along with the clothes we had washed and set out to dry.

Growing up in a fairly protected community in Morristown, New Jersey, I couldn't have ever imagined something like this. I remember standing in line for hours at the post office to make a collect call to my parents to let them know I was safe.

### **—Julie Stone**

I had never been on an airplane when I set off in 1970 for six months in Israel as an exchange student. I was 16 years old.

I was in shock for the first few months — coming from the antiwar movement in the U.S., to spending two weeks at Kibbutz Sde

Boker doing army training. I was the sole American. They handed me an Uzi. I made some speech about how we must pursue peace. I twisted my ankle the first day of training. Ben Gurion was still alive and lived at Sde Boker. I shook his hand.

I befriended Irit, a girl in my class. She was a serious student, a talented pianist and intellectual in a very European way. I remember sitting in her family's tiny kitchen in Ramat Gan. Irit's father was making shpeck. Her mother was plying me with tea and cake. They reminisced about their pre-war leftwing affiliations. Her mother lived in Germany until 1936. Her father was in Hungary until the deportations of 1944.

"Our experiences in Europe should serve as a warning to you," her mother said. "The Left did not care about Jews. Israel is the only alternative and hope for Jews in today's world."

When I returned in 1974, the first thing she asked me was, "So, are you still a leftist?"

### **—Hallie Segal**

#### **'It was normal to be Jewish'**

It was 1998. My wife and I met my two brothers and their spouses for several weeks in Israel. We did the usual: museums, Masada, a visit to a kibbutz, Haifa. But the highlight was Jerusalem, where our mother, Sarah, and her siblings were born.

After much research we found the home they lived in before immigrating to America in 1922. Before they left that home, they took a grand family photo. Our mother and her father were not present; they were already in America. A space was left and

the photographer later “burned in” their photos. Photoshop in 1922!

### **—Marvin Citron**

My first visit to Israel was in 1970. I arrived on a boat from Venice, and the first thing I did was kiss the ground.

As I traveled around Israel, I felt freed of this weight of antisemitism that I had not even been aware of. Suddenly, I was in a country where it was normal to be Jewish. I thought about making aliyah, but didn't. Too hard, I thought, too difficult. Had I immigrated, I would have been part of today's protests against Netanyahu's creeping fascism.

### **—Priscilla Alexander**

My first trip to Israel was December 1967, on a 10-day tour. In Nablus, our bus broke down and our guide and driver left to get help.

I wandered the narrow lanes and passageways, at first accompanied by others from my tour. Some Arabs joined us, and the Americans went back to our bus. I bought items at the outdoor shacks, where the owners were friendly and helpful. Two Arabs showed me the way to the post-office. I felt completely safe — and I was.

In Jerusalem, we visited the Wailing Wall, where men and women prayed together, without separation. We visited Dome of the Rock, took our shoes off, and prayed. Everything was peaceful and so hopeful.

### **—Natalie Baff**

July 1964. I was on a Jewish Agency program. When we first arrived we stayed at

a former youth aliyah site in a divided Jerusalem. After the orientation, we went to Kibbutz Yizre'el in the Jezreel Valley. Some of us, including me, harvested pears.

Israel was generally optimistic then. I had grown up in a small town in which Jews were a small minority. In Israel, almost everyone was Jewish. There was nothing that I needed to do to affirm that. Didn't need to attend synagogue services or belong to Hillel. Just be. A liberating concept.

### **—Helen Blumenthal**

#### **'Optimism, naivety and ignorance'**

I was born in Tel Aviv in 1946, but my parents left 8 months later, expecting to return after tensions and conflicts died down — which never happened.

So, my real first trip was when I was 20, when I was studying at the Hebrew University. I was there during the 1967 Six Day War, and was in the first group of civilians to reach the Western Wall after the war. The optimism, naivety and ignorance I had about Israel back then are not the same, but that war and the walk to the Kotel remain imprinted in my heart and mind.

### **—Ami Saperstein Zusman**

My first trip to Israel was in 2006. For the two weeks we had an extraordinary tour of the country, all through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, all the way to the Lebanese border. We stayed another week to visit my wife's relatives. I said to myself, I can see why people travel here, and why many move here.

We left Israel that third week and arrived in New York. On the monitors at the gate, we saw the news that the Israeli military had crossed into Lebanon. I guess we were lucky with our timing.

### **—Morris Weiner**

I first visited Israel in June 1982, when I didn't know an alef from a bet. My girlfriend urged me to go, so I joined a tour that arrived at the start of the First Lebanon War.

My photos from Masada, Yad Vashem, Hebron and the Western Wall mix with pictures of IDF trucks on the move, troops mustering and tank emplacements near the Lebanon border. The experience strengthened my engagement with Judaism. And as a reporter, I knew a good story when I lived one.

On Nov. 14, 1982, the Yiddish Forward's English section ran my account: "My First Time — Visit to Israel."

### **—Van Wallach**

My first trip to Israel was in August 1971. I graduated from NYU that January, and that summer went to Athens with my friend Judy and her Greek boyfriend, Dimitri. One day, lying in the sun at a beach, Dimitri said "Look, there go your planes overhead." I asked him what he meant. He explained those planes were the Israeli air force, and they belonged to me since I was Jewish.

It made such an impression that I called TWA and took a trip to Israel from Greece for a few days. I don't know what possessed me to do such a thing. I didn't know a soul in Israel, and I went alone. I called my parents and told them I was in Israel. They were so happy. All they ever wanted for me

was to connect to Israel, and all I wanted to do was go to Puerto Rico and Greece.

I returned to New York with a plan to make aliyah. I schlepped out to Pelham Parkway to learn Hebrew. The first word we learned was "kesher" — connection.

### **—Terri Granot**

# **I've been to Israel many times. These last 10 days were different**

By Jodi Lox Mansbach

TEL AVIV – As we approached customs at Ben Gurion International Airport, my group got separated. Half of the people were with the man who had come to meet us and the rest of us got stuck on the other side of a roped-off area. As we tried to reunite, a customs official intercepted us, threw up his hands dramatically and shouted: “Why are you here?”

It wasn't quite the welcome to Israel that our group from the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta, including many people on their first visit, was hoping for. To be fair, what he meant was “why are you in this line?” But over our 10-day trip, I returned again and again to that question: “Why are you here?”

For the first time in my many visits to Israel, I wasn't sure. An Israeli friend had told me I was crazy to come given the disruptions to daily life being caused by the anti-government demonstrations. Some American friends warned that terrorism was a bigger threat than it has been in a while. Others told me they were staying home because a visit to the country now is tantamount to showing support for the current government.

But I went because my parents, who are in their 80s, still remember being in Israel for

its 50th anniversary in 1998 and were determined to be there for the 75th. I went because our community was bringing a delegation for the national federations' big convention and offered an impressively layered itinerary that explored the complexities of the country through many different angles. I went because I had not been to Israel since the pandemic and I missed it.

And somehow in these last 10 days, my relationship to Israel shifted.

I'm an American Jew (or Jewish American) who simultaneously feels completely at home in Israel and like a visitor. I can be proud of Israel, its very existence and achievements, and also critical of its policies and actions at the same time.

But if I'm honest, when it comes to Israel's politics and policies, I have not been engaged or vocal, appreciating but also hiding in the complexities.

Living in the United States, I have not experienced the ongoing threat of terrorism, I did not serve in the Israel Defense Forces nor send my children to do so. I believed that meant I had forfeited the right to have a strong opinion and certainly a voice in the Jewish state.



And I never felt compelled to take action beyond providing financial support to nonprofits that work with and in Israel.

But this visit felt different. The first time I noticed it, I was walking through Gan Ha'atzmaut next to the beaches of Tel Aviv, and I heard more languages than I had ever heard being spoken in Israel. There were people exercising, celebrating 8th and 80th birthdays, and just hanging out playing soccer. Somehow hearing all those languages, the importance of a Jewish home hit me in a different way.

I felt it again when I joined the now-regular Saturday night demonstration against the current government's proposed judicial reform, marching in Jerusalem from the president's house to the prime minister's. Though I am not a Hebrew speaker and therefore could not understand all the speeches and chants, it was impossible not to feel the pervasive determination of the group.

I saw anger in the T-shirts worn by former soldiers with variations of the theme "We didn't fight for this." I saw sadness in the placards with an image of Theodor Herzl crying a giant teardrop. But mostly, I sensed the deep determination in the crowd. And, for the first time, I didn't feel like just an observer in what was happening.

And I'm not alone. Julie Platt, current chair of Jewish Federations of North America, addressed our Atlanta delegation during the week and wanted us to know that this is the first time in the organization's history that its leaders weighed in on a political issue in Israel.

The group issued a statement of respect for "the political leaders, business executives,

community activists, cultural figures, and ordinary Israelis who took to the streets, exercising their love of country, and their passion for democracy," adding: "We are confident the resilience of Israeli democracy will successfully overcome the tremendous challenges it faces."

As the special Israeli holiday season of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Memorial Day and Independence Day now come to an end and the Knesset prepares to advance its judicial reform, will the protests make a difference?

Most secular Israelis I spoke with said probably not. But it doesn't stop them from being out there. It may not change the outcome of the policies, but it's awakened a form of civic engagement that the country has not seen in years, if ever.

It certainly awakened me. Tonight I will be in New York and I will go to a Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration for the first time in many years. And I will wave the flag of Israel alongside the American flag in the hopes that both democracies have the resilience these times need more than ever.

**Opinion**

# Israel's current crisis is a necessary step in the process of state-making

By Michael Oren

There's no time that Israeli parents and grandparents hate more than late August. Summer programs have ended, school has yet to begin, and people still have to work. It's then that the national cry goes up: "What are we to do with the kids?"

The answer for my family and so many others is simple: Water parks.

The nearest one is in Holon, a largely working-class, unobtrusive suburb of South Tel Aviv. There, under a ganglia of fountains, sprouts and geysers, careening down slides that can take an hour to climb and seconds to descend, scream thousands upon thousands of Israelis.

I watched them this past August, while keeping a wary eye on my grandchildren, and marveled. After nearly 50 years of living here, analyzing Israel and commenting on it, on the eve of our 75th birthday, I finally understood us. A mere eight-hour drive from Cairo and Damascus, children of different races, religions and ethnicities splash together in peace.

At least a fifth of all those frolicking in Holon's waters were African. Not Jewish Ethiopians, but Sudanese, Somalians, Eritreans, and others whose mothers and fathers perhaps immigrated illegally but

whose children are Hebrew-speaking Israelis.

Another fifth were Arabs, the women wearing the same halal bathing suits identical from those favored by the Orthodox Jewish women chatting nearby, their children distinguished only by kippot and sidelocks. The remaining three-fifths were average, middle-class Jewish Israelis, mostly secular, all circling family picnic tables overflowing with food.

I looked at this glistening panorama, this festival of music, spray, schnitzel and glee, and thought to myself: This is the Israel that American Jews never see, that they cannot even begin to imagine. This, the Holon water park, is the real Israel.

Still, this idyllic image of Israel cannot disassemble the deep fissures that have opened within Israeli society in recent months, or the fact that Israel is in the throes of determining what sort of state our citizens wish it to be.

The Israel that exists today is very different from the one that I imagined growing up in a Conservative Jewish community in the 1960s. This was the Israel of kibbutzniks wearing their brim-down tembel hats and soiled khakis, improvising a hora after a

hard day's work in the fields. Of Ari Ben-Canaan, Leon Uris's archetypical Israeli hero played by a godlike Paul Newman in the movie, *Exodus*. Of paratroopers praying at the Western Wall draped in tallitot of machine gun bullets. This Israel, the good guy, stood up to evil Arab dictators. Young, energetic, virile, brave and not too religious — that was the Israel of my mind.

Upon moving to Israel, though, I swiftly discovered reality. As a researcher for the Joint Distribution Committee, I visited neighborhoods so poor they couldn't afford indoor plumbing and met Jews from underdeveloped countries who could scarcely write their own names.

In the army, while serving in a unit deliberately integrated with both well-off and socially disadvantaged soldiers, I saw an Israel grappling with worsening drug problems, crime, and discrimination. I fought in morally nebulous wars and patrolled the streets of Hebron and Nablus under watchful, embittered, eyes.

At the same time, though, I saw the emergence of an Israel that outshone even my mind's most scintillating image. I witnessed the arrival of nearly a million Jews from the former Soviet Union, the airlifting of tens of thousands of Ethiopian Jews, and the relocation of Western Jews in search of — improbably — high-tech jobs and lifestyles.

I saw, and in some cases participated in, the achievement of peace with Egypt, Jordan, and the Abraham Accord countries. I watched as Israel built relations with China, India, Russia and dozens of Asian, African and South American nations, and the

establishment of a deep and multi-faceted U.S.-Israel alliance. I saw Israel grow into a global leader in science, conservation, and healthcare, a country with an army more than twice as large as those of France and Great Britain combined.

Simultaneously, another Israel was forming in the minds of many American Jews. This was an Israel happy to receive financial and political support from Conservative and Reform Jews but unwilling to recognize their forms of worship. An Israel increasingly controlled by ultra-Orthodox parties which rejected conversions performed by many American rabbis, even Orthodox ones. An Israel of radical settlers who attacked Palestinian civilians, uprooted their trees and stole their land, and revered the late racist Rabbi Meir Kahane. Replacing the Israel of innovation, creativity, and freedom, was an Israel of intolerance, closed-mindedness and occupation.

The impeccable Israel of the mind of the 1960s, and the far more tarnished image that later clouded it, both contained elements of reality. Israel was a jewel of courage and creativity as well as a dross of radicalism and intolerance. The truth lay in a combination of the two, a hybrid state that was at once incomparable and flawed. And for 75 years, this amalgam survived and even thrived, thanks in part to external enemies that forced it to cohere. But then came peace with several of those enemies, enabling Israelis to look inward and confront our dual identities.

The result has been tumultuous. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis have been demonstrating against their government's attempts to remove all checks on its power by disempowering the Supreme Court. They

are protesting the government's support for Ultra-Orthodox schools which, by refusing to provide their students with a modern education, are producing generations of Israelis who will be unable to sustain the state. The demonstrators are protesting bigoted ministers who, with their hatred, may trigger widespread violence with the Palestinians.

As someone who remembers the anti-war protests of the 1960s, when American flags were burnt and servicepeople spat upon, these demonstrations are, in contrast, outpourings of patriotism, festooned with Israeli flags and accompanied by choruses of "Hatikvah." Policemen and soldiers are praised.

But what may seem to outsiders as a simple clash between pro and anti-democratic forces in fact barely disguises far more fundamental fissures. There is rich vs. poor, cities vs. the periphery, Ashkenazim vs. Mizrachim, religious vs. secular, left and center vs. right, Arab vs. Jew.

This is Israel, a society that is struggling to define itself. The current crisis is, in fact, a necessary step in the process of Israeli state-making. The fight over the government's assault on the Supreme Court has succeeded in compelling many to face the contradictions in Israeli society. It has awakened liberal Israel from its long complacency on issues ranging from the failure of ultra-Orthodox schools to the absence of a diplomatic process with the Palestinians. It has focused attention on the urgent need for judicial reform while maintaining limits on the legislature. The success of our next 75 years hinges on our ability to address these issues and to bridge the schisms threatening to tear us apart.

At 75, Israel is still in the process of becoming. A state in which millions of people go to work or school each day, raise families, and root for their favorite football teams. A nation that is healthy, high-functioning, and beloved by so many of its citizens, where the radios play Passover music and their DJs speak in the language of our prophets. This, perhaps, is our greatest accomplishment: creating a truly independent state with all the headaches of sovereignty.

This is the Israel of the Holon water park, a site that American Jews should visit, preferably in August. This is the real Israel — complex, controversial, and miraculous — a country with real challenges with which we, after two millennia of statelessness, are privileged to wrestle.

# Before Israel's birth, this company began sewing its flags. As Israel turns 75, it's still in business.

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM — Hela and Kalman Berman opened a mom-and-pop embroidery business in central Jerusalem in 1944 not long after they fled Poland for British-ruled Palestine to escape the Nazis. Mostly they embellished the dresses of wealthy local Jewish and Arab women, based on Kalman's drawings.

But in 1947, as Britain began to make plans to quit Mandatory Palestine, and Arab attacks on Jews escalated, the embroidery work dried up. Soon though, the young couple soon gained another, unexpected, source of income that would become the mainstay of their business.

An official from the pre-state Jewish government asked Hela, who was skilled at both embroidery and appliqué, if she could make what a few years later would officially become Israel's flag. He was so pleased with the result, he ordered many more.

Within a year, Israel was born, and Berman's Flags and Embroidery grew with the country, providing flags for some of its most historic occasions, including former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's 1977 visit to Israel and the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Today, nearly 80 years after its founding, Berman's is the oldest of Israel's few flag suppliers. And though the company has remained small, employing no more than 20 employees at its peak, it's still relied upon by government and other buyers who demand a made-in-Israel flag.

## Flags in the streets

This is Berman's busiest time of year, when a cluster of Israeli holidays — including Yom HaZikaron, dedicated to fallen soldiers, and Yom Ha'atzmaut, Independence Day — are celebrated. In the two months prior to Israel's birthday — it turns 75 on Tuesday — Berman's made as many as 30,000 flags, a company employee told American online magazine Israel 21C.

Even when it's not high season for the Israeli flag, which was designed to invoke a tallit, or Jewish prayer shawl, it's still the core of a business that also makes the flags of other nations, in addition to sports teams and an array of political parties. Ironically, the very recent surge in flag sales driven by the weekly pro-democracy demonstrations that have brought hundreds of thousands of Israelis into the streets since January hasn't

helped Berman's, since those flags are largely made in Asia.

"I've been to a few demonstrations and I didn't see a single flag made in Israel," said Hadassah Berman, the founders' daughter-in-law, who still helps run the company.

The imports are comparatively flimsy, weigh about a fifth of what a Berman flag weighs and don't wave as nicely in a breeze, she said during an interview at Berman's small factory in the Givat Shaul industrial zone of Jerusalem. Most of Berman's flags are printed, but employees sew the edges, and appliqués. At a customer's request, a whole flag can be hand-sewn.

"I'm not blaming the protesters," Berman, 75, said as she placed an imported flag and an Israeli-made one side-by-side. "I'm not sure they were aware that there are flags made in Israel. In Jerusalem."

A spokesman for the Umbrella Movement, a key organizer of pro-democracy demonstrations, said "people bring whatever flags they have at home."

Most flags — whether they are made by Berman's or manufacturers abroad — are of polyester, though nylon and cotton flags are also common. A 3-by-5 foot polyester flag made in China can cost less than \$2 online. A similarly sized Berman flag can cost many times that.

### **Made in Israel**

Berman said most of its flags are commissioned by the national government, municipalities, and local organizations.

"Municipalities are all very strict that their flags are made in Israel," Berman said. "They send inspectors to our factory, to watch our workers sew the flags."

Today, the company employs eight people — including Hadassah and her son Kalman — who are mostly middle-aged or older. Jewish and Arab workers sit side-by-side, leaning over sewing machines.

"It's difficult to find people to sew these days. They would rather work in high-tech," she said with a smile and a shrug.

Even Berman's late husband, Yitzhak, had other aspirations, but took over the business when his father died.

"It wasn't his calling, he had other plans, but he had to support his family," Berman said. "Yet he was very good with people, they liked him a lot, and he was able to expand the business."

Berman's doesn't discriminate in its flag manufacturing. Over the years, the company has created flags of dozens of countries, including several Arab nations that have fraught relations with Israel, as well as the Palestinian Authority. Political parties as diverse as Labor and Likud, and political movements as diametrically opposed as the leftist Peace Now and the right-wing settler group Hebron is Forever, also commission flags.

In the run up to the Independence Day, stores have been filled with imported flags and other items — from paper tablecloths to giant plastic hammers — emblazoned with the Israeli flag. Yet many people turn to Berman's because of what it represents.

Yishai Fleisher, international spokesman for the Jewish community of Hebron, said he buys the settlement's flags from Berman's because they are made in Israel, and because of their employees. "When you go there, you see all kinds of folks working there," he said. "The flags are made by local people who are part of Israel's story."

### False flag?

Anticipating Israel's 75th anniversary, Berman — who was born a few weeks before the founding of the state — waxed nostalgic.

She related how Berman flags took center stage at the signing of Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and how the company narrowly avoided delivering a flag with an embarrassing mistake.

In 1977, as rumors were flying that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat would make an unprecedented visit to Israel sometime soon, a reporter in the Arabic-language department at Israel Broadcasting News radio advised the Berman's to quickly manufacture some Egyptian flags.

"The problem was, we didn't know exactly what the Egyptian flag looks like. This was before the internet," Berman recalled. But the reporter was a soldier during the '73 war and took an Egyptian flag as a souvenir, which the company used as a prototype.

Within 48 hours the company created a great many Egyptian flags, only to learn that it had sewn the word "Libya" and not "Egypt," on them, thanks to the fact that Libya, Syria and Egypt, part of the same confederation, have very similar flags.

Despite the error, the company in record time created thousands of actual Egyptian flags, which wound up decorating the route that then Egyptian President Anwar Sadat took from the airport during his historic 1977 visit to Israel.

Berman recalled how Sadat's advance team was amazed that the company could produce so many flags within a couple of days.

"They asked, how did you do this?" The answer: "By sleeping on our sewing machines and working until two hours before Shabbat."

And for the peace treaty with Jordan, Berman's flags were so admired by a Jordanian prince that he took them home to adorn a palace.

"So we had to quickly start all over again," Berman said.

But she doesn't credit the company's longevity solely to the family and employees that have nurtured the business for nearly eight decades.

"Our parnassa is from God, not us," the matriarch said, using the Hebrew word for livelihood. "And God is taking good care of us."

# What I wish I had said to a young non-Zionist Jew about Israel

By Elliot Cosgrove

My daughter's best friend is a proud Jew: She was educated in Jewish day schools, spent summers at Jewish camp, was part of synagogue youth groups and participated in countless Israel programs. Her father was born in Israel, her mother is a powerhouse Jewish communal volunteer. She is smart, funny, active in her university Hillel, deeply compassionate and passionate about the Jewish people.

So I was caught off guard when she recently asked whether Park Avenue Synagogue, where I am senior rabbi, has an Israeli flag on its bimah and recites the prayer for the State of Israel on Shabbat. Yes to both, I said, then prodded a bit: "What is it you are really asking?"

What poured out of her mouth sounded like something of a manifesto. Zionism is a political ideology, she said. Synagogues that claim to be politically unaffiliated should not blindly promote it.

She went on to make the case that nationalism has, throughout history, generally been used to oppress and cause suffering, and that Jewish nationalism — Zionism — had very specifically oppressed and caused suffering to the Palestinians.

"A Jewish nation-state will never be able to uphold Jewish values," she said. "There have always been non-Zionist Jews. It's important to me that there be non-Zionist Jewish spaces because I want to practice Judaism and have a Jewish identity that does not involve nationalism."

I was caught flat-footed. As Israel turns 75 this week, here's what I wish I'd said.

## **You stand in good company**

I hear you. Judaism is not Zionism and Zionism is not Judaism, and the flag on the bimah and the prayer for Israel are not uncomplicated things. There are some people who would call you an "un-Jew" for what you are saying, but those people need to calm down. Your voice is important and not only are you not alone, you stand in some very good Jewish company.

There is a long history of people who held what is called a non-statist view of peoplehood. Not self-hating or waiting-for-the Messiah Jews. Proud Jews — labor Zionists, cultural Zionists, even religious Zionists who had attachments to the land but did not believe we should establish a modern nation-state.

When political Zionism began to take hold in the late 1800s, it was rejected by Orthodox



and Reform Jews alike. Even Theodor Herzl's initial vision did not include a military, borders or many of the other trappings of today's Israel. In fact, the first Zionist Congress in 1897 did not call for a state but a Jewish "national home, secured by public law."

I agree that Zionism is not Judaism, and I regret that the organized Jewish community made it seem so.

But in the wake of the Holocaust, American Jewry's support for Israel was critical. If we weren't going to move there, then we were going to support those who did — philanthropically and politically. Israel advocacy became a tool for solidarity, a response to antisemitism and a prophylactic against assimilation.

### **Zionism as a litmus test**

Somewhere along the way American Zionism became, in the words of the late Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, a "substitute religion." More problematically, it became a litmus test for Jewish loyalty; in Hertzberg's words, "the lack of support for Israel being the only offense for which Jews can be 'excommunicated.'"

Israel engagement and advocacy was used to paper over the thinness of American Jewish identity. I am a huge supporter of Israel travel and study, but if it is the most powerful lever we have to reinvigorate diaspora Jewish life, we have some serious soul-searching to do.

I understand that when you look at Israel — when I look at Israel, when anyone looks at Israel — we see a government that stands in breach of many of our values, including our Jewish values. Democracy, religious

pluralism, gay rights, the Palestinian right to self-determination, the very values that your Jewish education has instilled in you.

I, too, am deeply worried about what will become of liberal Zionism should Israel cease to be a liberal democracy.

And how can I ask you to support an Israel that doesn't even acknowledge you? More than half of young Israelis are either Haredi or Arab; for them, non-Orthodox American Jews like you and I are an abstraction. A typical secular Israeli expends zero psychic energy thinking about the shared destiny of the Jewish people. Diaspora Jews play no role in Knesset politics.

You're not crazy for asking these tough questions. You'd be crazy if you didn't.

Our eyes have always been turned toward Zion

But I never said that synagogues are apolitical. A good synagogue is not only a house of prayer, but a place that helps Jews wrestle with Jewish values. It should inspire them to see those values manifest in this world — sometimes through the instrument of politics. High on that list of values is engagement with Israel.

Despite the existence of non-Zionists throughout our history, I think it's a profound misreading of that history to call Judaism anything other than a land-centered faith. From God's first call to Abraham to our arrival in the Promised Land and through the exile; in the words and direction of our prayer and the aspirations we hold — our eyes have always been turned towards Zion.

That is why we have the Israeli flag on the bimah and why we recite the prayer for Israel. It is why I am a proud Zionist, why I am politically engaged on behalf of Israel and why I ask that my congregants be as well.

You are right that we live in a time when “nationalism” has become an ugly word. It is nice to imagine a world, as John Lennon did, “where there’s no countries” and “nothing to kill or die for.” But we live in the actual world, not an imagined one.

The rise of political Zionism reflects the belief that Jews have a moral right and historic need for self-determination within historic Palestine. To be the subject of our own sentence and not the object of someone else’s.

### **Israel is a part of my being**

The world changed when the modern state of Israel was established on May 14, 1948. I can imagine traveling back in time to debate whether we should be Zionists in a 19th century Viennese coffee shop, just as I can imagine living in a world without penicillin. But I have no desire to do either.

Does Israel’s right of sovereignty clash with the Palestinian’s self-same right? Of course it does. Should Israel, no different than the Palestinians, be held responsible for its role in obstructing a two-state solution? Absolutely.

Israel is a deeply imperfect state. But given the choice of a sovereign and imperfect Israel or the moral purity of exiled victimhood, I would choose the former over the latter any day, and so should you.

To deny your own people the same rights you would fight for on behalf of others is an act of self-abnegation. We didn’t choose to live during this era of history in which a sovereign state of Israel exists, but we should be grateful that we do.

Israel is the greatest achievement of the Jewish people in the past century, if not the entirety of our existence. The expression of a multi-millennial hope, the home to half our people. Though I have chosen not to live there, to be a Jew means to understand Israel as a constituent part of my being.

### **We need your voice**

Yet as Israel turns 75, it is not just troubled – it is on the brink. The fault lines have broken open before our very eyes: the future of its democratic institutions, the potential for a third intifada, the erosion of its standing in the community of nations, the bitter irony that it is in the Jewish state where liberal Jews like us cannot always practice our Judaism freely.

That is why hundreds of thousands of Israelis are protesting on the streets every week. Is some of this pain self-inflicted? Absolutely. Has the complicit silence of American Jewry helped enable it? I think we agree that it has. But let’s stop living in the past and start asking what we do now.

There are those who say that criticizing Israel is a sign of disloyalty. I say otherwise. Just as my activism as an American is an expression of my patriotism, not counter to it, so is my Zionism. If up to 500,000 Israelis can express their love for Israel by protesting its government, so can we.

Are you going to walk away and stand on the sidelines? Or are you going to leverage

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your voice, and put the piercing clarity of your conscience and Jewish values to work in order to spark change, fight for your ideals, and help Israel realize the fullness of its founding vision?

I not only hear you and your peers, I am proud of you. Not only do you have a place in the Zionist conversation, it is a conversation that depends on you. We might not always agree, but the community needs you.

And on its 75th birthday, Israel needs you.

# **Israeli soldiers occupied my home for years. 75 years in, have the protesters forgotten us in Gaza?**

By Yousef Bashir

As a Palestinian American from Gaza, I have watched recent demonstrations in Israel with many emotions. Now even the term “Day of Resistance” has taken on a new meaning.

To someone like me, “Day of Resistance” always meant young Palestinians protesting Israel’s military policies in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Almost always, the Israeli Defense Forces and Border Police arrested scores of Palestinians (oftentimes children) using a controversial administrative detention policy under which a 16-year-old can be held in prison for an unspecified amount of time. Many were tear-gassed, and others shot, wounded, and in many cases, killed.

Recent “Days of Resistance,” however, were not led by Palestinians but by Israeli Jewish citizens protesting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his far-right governing coalition’s attempt to neuter the Supreme Court in order to enhance their own power. I watched thousands of Israelis take to the streets over the last few months, blocking intersections and highways. I witnessed police on horses violently pushing back marchers, protesters fleeing

from water cannons and police firing stun grenades into crowds. The scenes were quite chaotic and ignited a wave of paradoxical emotions in me, certainly, and likely in many Palestinians.

After Palestinians have spent decades trying to obtain equal rights, I feel conflicted about Jewish Israelis protesting out of fear for their democracy and human rights. On the one hand, I support equal rights and fair representation, but my sense tells me that they are protesting to protect their rights only.

For someone like me, who grew up under Israeli occupation, the mass demonstrations are riveting to watch, as the right to protest by Palestinians is almost non-existent. The Israeli justice system not only provided legal cover to the soldiers who occupied our home in Gaza from 2000 to 2005, but denied my father justice every time he went to an Israeli court to try and remove them. It continues to deny my people at every turn. When Palestinians protest, they are arrested and often shot and killed, even if they do not pose any immediate danger to an IDF soldier or policeman. This has been the way of life for decades, with Israel’s

judicial system often providing legal protection for the violent suppression of peaceful Palestinian protest.

When Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza on June 7, 1967, the Israeli army issued Military Order 101, which criminalizes participation in a gathering of more than 10 people without a permit on an issue “that could be construed as political,” punishable by a sentence of up to 10 years. Israel also permitted the application of a British Mandate law — the Defense (Emergency) Regulations of 1945 — in August of 1976 to further quell Palestinian resistance by prohibiting groups that advocate for the “exciting of disaffection” against the state, including the publishing of material “having a political significance” or displaying “flags or political symbols” without army approval. More than 52 years later, the Israeli army continues to prosecute and imprison Palestinians under these acts.

Still, a part of me, I suppose that is the human part, could not help but sympathize with those Israelis protesting. Moreover, that human part made me want them to succeed. I have grown used to watching as Israel and its Western allies accuse Palestinian demonstrators of being violent, even when they are not, and Palestinian teenagers are repeatedly labeled as terrorists. Now, the Netanyahus and Ben-Gvirs of the world are accusing Israeli protests of being funded by foreign elements, radical leftists and self-hating Jews with “radical” demands like equality, freedom and justice.

What feels different this time is that the Israeli policies Palestinians have protested for years are about to also be applied to Jews. Palestinians have protested Israeli

policies for decades, especially those initiated by the far-right parties, and no one, especially not the Israeli public, paid attention. In a way, this time, Israelis are getting a taste of their own medicine, a glimpse into a world without civil rights and where politicians act with impunity.

I moved to the U.S. when I was 16 to attend high school in Utah, and finally became a citizen in 2019, barely a year before George Floyd was murdered. I could not help but get involved in the demonstrations that were sparked after his killing during the summer of 2020. When stun grenades were fired to disperse protesters at St. John’s Church in Washington, D.C., on June 1, 2020, I was there. I did not run away but remained transfixed. It reminded me of the time an IDF smoke grenade landed at my feet near my house in Der-El-Balah in Gaza at the outbreak of the Second Intifada, across the street from the former settlement of Kfar Darom.

My parents were adamant about nonviolence as a form of resistance. They taught my siblings and me that one can also protest by getting high grades in school in order to have a successful career and the ability to truly help one’s people. Many choices ran through my mind as I watched the smoke billow from the ground in front of me. I worried my father would see me if I picked it up, as the protest was very close to our house. But in that moment, I couldn’t avoid it sitting at my feet, nor could I run away from it. Something in my heart told me it should never have landed at my feet or been fired toward me in the first place.

I picked it up and handed it over to a slightly older Palestinian who wore gloves. He took it from me and threw it back at the soldiers

who were well-protected in their watchtower. The smoke crushed my lungs and squeezed every possible tear out of my eyes. I went home and discreetly washed up so that neither my mother nor father could see my red face or red eyes.

The memory of my stinging eyes and lungs was crystal clear as I watched fellow Americans run from our own police in the George Floyd protests. I somehow felt normal witnessing this because I understood that Palestinians were not alone in demanding justice and equality.

So, like millions of Palestinians, I feel conflicted about recent protests in Israel. I can't help but support Israelis protesting their own government even though I understood that the justice system they were trying to preserve failed then, and now, to protect my family and my people.

It failed to stop IDF soldiers from occupying my family's home for five years. It failed to prevent the demolition of my father's greenhouses. It failed to protect my father and brother from being shot and injured, my mother from being intimidated and me from being shot in the spine with an M-16 when I was 15 years old. The Israeli soldiers harmed my family because my peace-loving father refused to flee his home and hand it over to the soldiers, and the judicial system that Israelis are now so desperate to save only aided in perpetrating that harm.

Yet after witnessing the protests in the United States against police brutality after George Floyd's murder and seeing the massive demonstrations in Israel now, I cannot help but feel connected to Israeli Jews' struggle against state power. Even after all that my family and my people have

suffered, the fight against injustice is one that inexorably unifies us all.

I do understand now, however, despite my mixed feelings, that justice, democracy, and freedom cannot be bought or bestowed. They must be fought for by people standing together, and right now, that includes the Israelis.



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