

## Rabbi Lewis' Message for May, 2012

Sometimes I feel a sense of helplessness about teaching Israel. It isn't about the Israeli government or its politics; we could debate Israeli politics forever and it wouldn't bother me. It is about how you teach love of a country you have never visited yourself. It is about how you convey the feeling you get when you at last find yourself in what Theodor Herzl referred to as the *Altneueland*, the "old new land." It is about how to impart what the country smells like when the orange trees are in blossom. It is about how to help American Jews feel connected to Israel in a deep way, not through what you read in the newspapers or see on television, but through what you feel in your heart.

As we get further and further from Israel's birth 64 years ago, it is too easy to focus on Israel's impossible political situation and forget that Israel is a modern miracle. Israeli Independence Day, *Yom HaAtzmaut*, is a moment in which we stop and celebrate that miracle. The Israeli humorist Ephraim Kishon once wrote, "Israel is a land in which they don't hope for miracles; they expect them." The miracle of modern Israel is no accident. It is a result of hard work and defiant faith.

Sixty-four years ago, it wasn't clear what was to happen to the remnant of European Jews who had survived the Holocaust. The United Nations Commission on the Partition of Palestine met and debated their fate. It fell to David ben Gurion to go before the Commission and persuade them of the need for a modern Jewish state. How could Ben Gurion help the Commission understand that Israel had always been our home even when we lived dispersed to the four corners of the earth. Israel remained the heart of the Jewish people no matter where we lived and prayed.

Ben Gurion's appearance before the Commission happened right before Passover. He worried about how to anticipate the objections of the British and the Americans before whom he would appear. This is what he said:

"Three hundred years ago, a ship called the Mayflower set sail to the New World. This was a great event in the history of the English. Yet I wonder if there is one Englishman who knows at what time the ship set sail? Do the English know how many people embarked on this voyage? What quality of bread did they eat? Yet more than three-thousand-three-hundred years ago, before the Mayflower set sail, the Jews left Egypt. Every Jew in the world, even in America or Soviet Russia, knows exactly on what day they left: the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. Everyone knows what kind of bread the Jews ate. Even today, the Jews worldwide eat matzah on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nisan. They retell the story of the exodus and all the troubles Jews have endured since being exiled. They

conclude this evening with two statements: 'This year, slaves, next year free.' 'Next year in Jerusalem, in Zion, in Eretz Yisrael.' That is the nature of the Jews.”

Was it the impact of Ben Gurion’s words that led the Commission to the [Partition Plan](#)? We will never know. We just know that, with the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel, we who had spent most of history under the control of others once again began to control our own lives, politics, and religious activities. For the first time since antiquity, Jewish religious leaders had the opportunity to compose a prayer for the Jewish leaders of a Jewish state.

That prayer was not in the prayerbook we used previously but it appears in edited form in the new prayerbook of the Reform Movement. Last week, Cantor Elana sang one version with us during Shabbat services. The authorship of the prayer is unclear. Some say Chief Rabbis Yitzhak Herzog and Ben Zion Uziel wrote the words in the 1940s with the assistance of other rabbis. Others say those rabbis revised the prayer utilizing suggestions made by a pioneer of modern Hebrew literature, Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Still others claim that Agnon wrote the prayer himself and that it was later adopted by the Chief Rabbinate. The origins of the prayer matter less than the meaning of its words, which remain as fitting today as when they were first composed.

Avinu Shebashamayim,  
O heavenly One, Protector and Redeemer of Israel,  
bless the State of Israel which marks the dawning of hope for all who seek peace.  
Shield it beneath the wings of Your love; spread over it the canopy of Your Peace;  
send Your light and truth to all who lead and advise, guiding them with Your good counsel.  
Establish peace in the land and fullness of joy for all who dwell there. Amen.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis