



JEWISH COMMENTARY

The Miracle at 70

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

SEVENTY YEARS AGO, on the 14th of May, David Ben-Gurion and his Zionist compatriots were poised to declare the first Jewish commonwealth in almost two millennia. Israel's founders, however, were delayed, bogged down in a matter of textual minutiae. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon, rabbinic representative of the Religious Zionist movement, proclaimed himself unwilling to sign any Declaration of Independence that made no reference to the God of Israel. Aharon Zisling, the secular head of the socialist party Mapam, asserted that he could not affirm the existence of a God in Whom he did not believe. The British were departing, the Arab armies were descending, and the Jews were debating whether God existed.

It was Ben-Gurion himself who proposed a compromise: Israel's Declaration of Independence would conclude by asserting that each signer placed his trust in the "Rock of Israel," the *Tzur Yisrael*, a phrase from the Jewish liturgy inspired by the biblical reference to God as *tzuri ve-go'ali*, my Rock and my Redeemer.

By referring to the "Rock of Israel," but refraining from any explicit mention of divine redemption, Israel's declaration was one that both devout and atheistic Zionists could affirm. For believers in the Bible, the phrase could refer to the divine defender of the Jewish people; for the secular socialist signers of the document, the words could instead make reference to the flint-like resolution of the Israeli army. The compromise was accepted, and the modern Jewish state was born by eliding the issue of the existence of God.

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For myself, a religious Zionist and American-history aficionado, the story is doubly painful. Thomas Jefferson, the deistic drafter of the Declaration in Philadelphia, produced a first version without any reference to the divine designs of history. The continental Congress, however, representing an America obsessed with the Bible, edited the dramatic closing of the original draft so that it made clear that the revolution was being launched with "a firm reliance on divine providence."

The irony is difficult to miss. America, inspired by the Israelite commonwealth in the Hebrew Bible, ordered that a reference to a providential God be added to its Declaration of Independence. But in the 20th century, the restored Israelite commonwealth went out of its way to remove any such reference.

For religious Zionists, however, removing God from a document did not do away with God's role in the divinely directed drama that is Jewish history; in fact, the contrary is true. Sidney Morgenbesser, the kibitzing Columbia philosopher, once inquired of a colleague at the end of his life: "Why is God making me suffer so much? Just because I don't believe in him?" Morgenbesser's droll dialectic captures, for people of faith, something profound: It is those agnostic of God's existence who can at times reify that very same existence. In a much more profound sense, the events that preceded and followed Israel's declaration of statehood are so staggering that providence alone explains them.

Harry Truman, the former member of the Missouri political machine whom no one had ever expected to become president of the United States, overrode his hero, General George C. Marshall, in supporting and recognizing the birth of a Jewish state. And he did so,

in part, because of his relationship with a Jew named Eddie Jacobson, with whom Truman had run a haberdashery business decades before.

Joseph Stalin, whose anti-Semitism rivaled Hitler's, ordered the Soviet bloc at the United Nations to support partition, and then he allowed Czechoslovakia to sell airplanes and arms to the nascent state. The Jews of the IDF, fighting against overwhelming odds, did indeed illustrate flint-like toughness in their heroic victory; but the honest student of history can see that this is only part of the story.

Seventy years after May 14, 1948, religious Zionists still smart at the words with which Israel came into being. At the same time, they take comfort in the fact that what followed that extraordinary day vindicates their own interpretation of the words *Tzur Yisrael*. In his memoir, former Israeli Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the youngest survivor of Buchenwald, describes the moment when the concentration camp was liberated by Patton's Third Army. Many inmates, having longed for release, ran to the gates—and as they did so, the Nazis, in a final attempt at murdering the prisoners, opened fire from the guard tower. Lau was in the line of fire; suddenly, someone jumped on him and held him down until the shooting had stopped. Having no idea who had saved his life, Lau made his way to Palestine, attended yeshiva, and entered the rabbinate. The first position for which he interviewed was chief rabbi of Netanya. Interviewing for the job with city officials, he encountered hours of question from the mayor of Netanya and his staff. The deputy mayor of Netanya, a man by the name of David Anilevitch, who ought to have been deeply involved in the interview, sat on the side and oddly said nothing. As the interview came to a close, Anilevitch stood up and said:

Friends, honored rabbi, before we disburse, please allow me to say my piece.... I have been reliving 11 April 1945. I was deported from my hometown to Buchenwald. On April 11, American airplanes circled in the skies above the camp. The prisoners, myself among them, were first out of the barracks. As we ran, a hail of bullets passed us. Among those running toward the gate was a little boy....I jumped on

top of him, threw him to the ground, and lay over him to protect him from the bullets. And today I see him before me alive and well. Now I declare this to all of you: I, David Anilevitch, was saved from that horror, fought in the Palmach, and today serve as deputy mayor of an Israeli city.

Anilevitch, Lau concludes, then banged on the table so that all the glasses shook and said: "If I have the merit of seeing this child, whom I protected with my body, become my spiritual leader, then I say to you that there is a God."

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sun, the opening of the earth. Yet, by the very same definition, it is a miracle that Israel was born, and endured in the way that it did. It is a miracle that after a generation in which many Jewish children grew up without parents, let alone grandparents, we have experienced the fulfillment of Zachariah's prophecy that grandparents will watch their grandparents play in the streets of Jerusalem. It is a miracle that after so many civilizations have disappeared, Jewish children continue to be born. It is a miracle that as anti-Semitism continues to haunt the nations of Europe that persecuted the Jews for so long,

religious Judaism flourishes in Israel even as a now secular Europe demographically declines.

More than any other event in the last 70 years, the state that was born in avoidance of any explicit affirmation of Israel's God now stands as the greatest argument for the existence of that very same God. And that is why many Jews, on the 70th anniversary of Israel's independence, will recite with renewed fervor prayers in the daily traditional liturgy that 70 years ago had been at least partially fulfilled:

*O Rock of Israel,
Arise in Defense of Israel,
And redeem, as you have promised,
Judah and Israel.
Our redeemer, the Lord of Hosts is your
Name, the Sacred One of Israel
Blessed are you, O Lord, Who redeemed
Israel. §▶*