

Dear Friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

In my last message in the bulletin, I reflected on the wicked child of the Passover Haggadah and how to "bring him home," how to make him or her part of the story. I then associated my thoughts on alienation and disconnection with how many Jews today feel about Israel.

Little did I know when I wrote my message for the May bulletin, that a month later I would find myself writing a message as rockets fell heavily on Israel, including Ashkelon, where my mother-in-law and brother-in-law and his family live.

As we advocate for the right of our brothers and sisters to live peacefully and securely in Israel, I believe that it is very important to recall the great miracle that the State of Israel represents, not only for those who choose to live in Israel, but for all Jews, everywhere.

At Hillcrest Jewish Center we celebrated Israel's 75th birthday with an informal evening party and with a wonderful Shabbat Kiddush luncheon, sponsored by the Hillcrest Jewish Center Sisterhood (one more time, my appreciation to our Shul's Sisterhood for everything they do).

The Kiddush luncheon was prefaced by some reflections written by Bertha Strauss, precisely highlighting the miraculous nature of the State of Israel. For those who weren't there, and also for those who attended the festive occasion, I would like to share Bertha's words, that summarize the uniqueness of the State of Israel and highlight its connection with all of us. I am grateful to Bertha for allowing me to share her words with all of you.

*The State of Israel came into existence on 14th May 1948, as David Ben-Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel, read the Declaration of Independence in Tel Aviv on behalf of the provisional government. The Hebrew date was the 5th day of the month of Iyar 5708, and every year on this day we celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day*

*Jews have lived in almost every country under the sun. In four thousand years, only in Israel have they been a free, self-governing people. Only in Israel are they able, if they so choose, to construct an agriculture, a medical system, an economic infrastructure in the spirit of the Torah and its concern for freedom, justice, and the sanctity of life. Only in Israel can Jews today speak the Hebrew of the Bible as the language of everyday speech. Only in Israel can they live Jewish time within a calendar structured according to the rhythms of the Jewish year. Only in Israel can Jews live Judaism in anything other than an edited edition. In Israel, and only there, Jews can walk where the Prophets walked, climb the mountains Avraham climbed, lift their eyes to the hills that David saw, and continue the story their ancestors began.*

*Twenty-six centuries ago, in exile in Babylon, the Prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel) had the most haunting of all prophetic visions. He saw a valley of dry bones, a heap of skeletons. God asked him, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Yechezkel replied, "God, You alone know." Then the bones came together, and grew flesh and skin, and began to breathe, and live again. Then God said: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost [avdah tikvateinu].' Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the God says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel'" (Yechezkel 37:1-14).*

*It was this passage that Naftali Herz Imber was alluding to in 1877, when he wrote, in the song that became Israel's national anthem, Hatikvah, the phrase od lo avdah tikvatenu, 'Our hope is not yet lost.' Little could he have known that seventy years later one third of the Jewish people would have become, in Auschwitz and Treblinka, a valley of dry bones. Who could have been blamed for saying 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost'?*

*Yet, a mere three years after standing face-to-face with the Angel of Death, the Jewish people, by proclaiming the State of Israel, made a momentous affirmation of life, as if it had heard across the centuries the echo of God's words to Yechezkel: "I will bring you back to the land of Israel."*

After her words, Bertha invited all of us to rise and to sing Hatikvah.

Let me conclude this message by inviting all of you to stand with Israel and to continue to explore new ways to relate to Israel, to connect with its story, to cherish its miraculous past, and to live its promising future.

With love and blessings,

*Rabbi Manes Kogan*