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70 Years Isn't Enough

Seventy is the age of wisdom for individuals, and in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Kedoshim, the focus of honor and respect. But for countries, being 70 years old is being barely a teenager, hardly time to get past being wet behind the ears.

As many of you are aware, this week Israel celebrated its 70th birthday. While there were celebrations, barbecues, and fireworks, it is also a troubled time.

Yair Lapid, head of the centrist Yesh Atid party, the second largest in the Knesset, criticized Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his failure to protect democracy in attacking the Israeli Supreme Court. The Prime Minister has also been the focus of several different scandals, with legal action pending. The situation in Gaza continues to be very dire from both a humanitarian and a security perspective, and Israel's former ally Turkey has moved out of the democratic column. There is, of course, also the situation in Syria, which has the potential to erupt into a direct confrontation between Israel and Iran with implications for the United States–Russia relationship.

Being ranked one of the happiest countries on the globe (11th, while the US was ranked 18th by the world Economic Forum) and being as wealthy as many European countries, is something—but one must also consider that Israel, once an egalitarian society, is now one of countries with the greatest income

inequality, eighth in the world, just behind the United States which is ranked fifth by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Israel excels as a technological innovator and is a leader in medical research, and its artists, musicians, and writers win prestigious international awards like the Man Booker Prize; still, its public educational system is failing, and its social safety net has been shredded.

Zionism was supposed to solve the Jewish problem and bring an end to anti-Semitism, but instead in some way Israel has become an outcast, the “Jew” among the nations, and generates its own issues of anti-Israelism.

In the face of these problems, what are we to say about the great experiment of Jewish national independence?

Thinking about the complicated situation today, I was reminded of the Biblical approach to nationalism.

In the time when Israel was a federation of loosely connected tribes, ruled by judges, the people came to the prophet Samuel to ask for a king. They needed protection from the Philistines, who had taken the Ark of the Covenant captive in battle and were a great threat to many of the tribes. The Israelites wanted to be like the countries around them who had kings, chariots, and metal implements of war.

In a way this reminded me of the Zionist argument of the late 19th and early 20th century. The Jews, a nation without a national political entity, were an irregularity

in the body politic. They needed to become more like other nations; that would offer the Jewish People protection. British citizens abroad were not attacked, the argument went, because they carry the passport of Her Majesty's Government. Jews, living as a minority around the globe, had no such passport, nor an army or navy to defend them. That is why the Jews were victims of pogroms and discrimination, with worse to follow in the new century.

When the people come to Samuel asking for a king, he warned them that this new institution will have its downside. The king would tax them for his own benefit, he would multiply horses and wives, he would draft their sons and daughters for his own service. And all of these things do indeed come to pass, even in the reign of King Solomon, much praised in our tradition for his wisdom. And yet God allows the Israelites to have kings, and even has Samuel appoint first Saul and then David and his dynasty. What are we to learn from this?

Having power, having a state of one's own, is not simple. Moral issues arise that would never have come about if the Jewish people had remained stateless. Living out the important values expressed in Israel's Declaration of Independence is not as easy as writing those words. Yet in acquiescing to the king, there is recognition that being defenseless is even worse.

It is like the story that Rabbi Akivah tells of the fox and the fish:

"A fox was walking along a river and saw fish rushing to and fro.

He said to them: 'What are you fleeing?'

They said to him: 'The nets that the humans spread for us.'

He said to them: 'Why don't you come out onto the dry land?'

We'll live together, as my ancestors lived with your ancestors.'

They said to him: 'Are you the one of whom it is said that you are the wisest of animals? You're not wise, but foolish! If, in our environment of life, we have cause for fear, how much more so in the environment of our death!'

However much having a state of our own is a challenge, posing internal and external challenges that we have not resolved over these past 70 years, *kal vechomer*, how much the more so would Jewish life be endangered without a haven for Jews seeking refuge, and a voice among the community of nations. May the words of Israel's Declaration of Independence find fulfillment and the hope we express each time we sing Hatikvah be realized. At human birthdays we say, *ad meah ve-esrim*, to 120; so may we pray that Israel will have many years to mature into a state that can fulfill its values.