

להיות עם חופשי בארצנו - To be a free people in our land

What should *Shabbat Ha'Am HaYehudi* be 'about'? How can it connect and bind Yom HaShoah - commemorating the Jewish People's most powerless moment in history, to Yom Ha'atzmaut which commemorates our return to power and independence? How can we find common ground between Israelis and Jews around the world that acknowledges difference yet celebrates shared values? We would suggest that the process we undergo during these "Nine Days of Collective Redemption", (as coined by Avram Infeld) can be anchored in an inspiring organising theme:

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This would allow us to focus on four key areas of Jewish existence that underwent (and continue to undergo) such a radical transformation between 1945 and 1948.

להיות - To be - would address the extent to which the creation of the State of Israel served and serves the survival or the Jewish people. To be in the sense of 'exist'. It would likewise explore the idea of 'normality' that Israel was expected to engender. To be in the sense of 'let it be'...

עם - People - would address the way in which Israel is connected to the Jewish People culturally, historically, religiously. Where Israel expresses its connection to the Jewish world and its meaning. At the same time this sub-theme would address the nature of Jewish collectivity.

חופשי - Free - would address the nature of freedom as embodied in the creation of the State. Not simply the freedom of Pesach, which celebrates a freedom from suffering and persecution, but also the very particular form of freedom that Statehood has brought: the freedom to take responsibility for oneself, the freedom to grant or refuse freedoms to others. Freedom would also refer to the freedom to create, to innovate, and to renew.

בארצנו - In our land - would address the specificity of Israel as a geographical, political, and historical entity with deep significance to the Jewish People. This sub-theme would also address the question of ownership: the proof of ownership and the expectations and responsibility of 'owners'.

Were we to remove the word People - **עם** - from this phrase, we would be left with what was the Meretz slogan in favor of the Gay Pride March in Jerusalem 2006. To be free in our land is a worthy aspiration that pays no heed to a shared Jewish collective. Were we to remove the word Free - **חופשי** - we might sum up the cultural non-military approach of R. Yochanan ben Zachai, establishing Roman protection of Yavneh's scholars. And removal of In Our Land - **בארצנו** - would leave our Chag Ha'atzmaut theme with no reference to Israel!

Reflection

To our mind, the other advantage of this four-point organizing theme, is that it can give respect to unresolved questions and concerns. To what extent Israel has ensured the continued survival of the Jewish People (**להיות**), how far Israel has strayed from or developed the culture it shares with Jews around the world (**עם**), whether Israelis take full responsibility for their collective and individual actions (**חופשי**), and a Diaspora Jew's connection to the land of Israel (**בארצנו**) - all these are issues that can be aired and housed within this overall structure. In this way we manage to draw our concerns for Israel into a higher and deeper realm of consideration, so that our questions need not be suffered or ignored, but honored.

Rejoicing

This four-point set of principles can also offer us an effective pathway into rejoicing. For no matter how one chooses to define our current situation, the Jewish People is closer to normality and more equipped to survive and fend for itself than it was before 1948 (**להיות**), is more capable of acting as a collective (**עם**), more free than ever in history (**חופשי**), and living in the land of our forefathers (**בארצנו**). Looking towards Yom Ha'atzmaut through these principles, we can find reason for joy as well as reflection.

By the end of February, we will be publishing guidelines for a 'seder plate' ritual structure based around these four themes, a chevruta study booklet for communal learning on these themes, and a full-length article outlining the thinking behind this project.