



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

### Yom Ha'atzmaut

Israel's Independence Day

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Retraining Our Hearts

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In AJU's *Miller Introduction to Judaism* program, our class about Israel opens with the following question: Given the fact that for most of Jewish history, the majority of the People of Israel has lived in the Diaspora, how did we maintain a connection with the Land of Israel for thousands of years? Students, many of whom are considering conversion, marvel at the fact that the land their partners or friends have spent perhaps just 10 days visiting, constitutes such a central facet of Jewish identity. The class offers their theories: the centrality of Israel in the biblical narratives, the perpetual fear of displacement or expulsion experienced by so many Jewish Diaspora communities over the generations, the syncing of our calendars and compasses to Israel—"next year in Jerusalem." Countless expressions of yearning for a return to the Land of Israel fill the pages of our liturgy, but I would like to highlight one particular moment of such expression.

"If I forget Jerusalem, let me forget my right hand" (Psalms 137:5). In a traditional Jewish wedding, this verse is recited immediately prior to the breaking of the glass at the conclusion of the ceremony. Many beautiful explanations have been attached to this custom, from recognizing the brokenness of the world to recalling the breaking of the tablets Moses received on Sinai. Yet, the most common interpretation connects the custom with the enduring sadness we experience in light of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent exile. It is somewhat counter intuitive. After all, is not this moment meant to be fully joyous and blissful? The tradition is sending a calculated message: when we are most likely to be preoccupied with our own lives, that is precisely the moment to expand our realm of concern. Thus, it isn't sadness that is being invoked under the chuppah, it's responsibility.

In today's context, what does it mean to "forget Jerusalem"? On Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, we mark 73 years of the only period of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel in the last 2,000 years. Israel's history is complex: its achievements miraculous; its shortcomings painful. On Yom Ha'atzmaut, we direct our hearts eastward, in part to pray for Israel like we have for thousands of years. Forgetting Jerusalem is ceasing to care about the direction, future, safety, and stability of the State of Israel. Forgetting Jerusalem does not belong to one political persuasion or the next; it exists in the domain of apathy. It is the abdication of responsibility.

In Leviticus Rabbah 4:6, the Rabbis teach, "Hezkiya taught: "The People Israel are scattered sheep" (Jeremiah 50:17). Why are Israel likened to a sheep? Just as a sheep, when hurt on its head or some other body part, all of its body parts feel it. So it is with Israel..." On Yom Ha'atzmaut, let us remember that Israel—the people, the land, the state, are inextricably connected to the Jewish people. When Israel is in pain, Jews living all around the world, are meant to feel that pain and address it. That is how, God willing, a healthy body functions. Can we retrain our hearts and minds to remember our right hand, to care for it, to guide it towards peace and justice?



**Rabbi Morris Panitz** serves as the Director of BCI and Director of Immersive Experiences at American Jewish University. He cherishes the opportunity to partner with people who are seeking meaningful connection to Jewish wisdom and community. Morris received rabbinical ordination from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies and was a recipient of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship. Prior to rabbinical school, he combined his love for Jewish, experiential education, and environmental sustainability as the Program Director of the Pearlstone Center in Baltimore, Maryland. Morris completed a Certificate in Jewish, Experiential Education from Yeshiva University and received his B.A. from the University of Maryland in Philosophy and Jewish Studies. He loves hiking and gardening with his wife, Elana, and two children, Ziva and Matan. Rabbi Morris can be reached at [morris.panitz@aju.edu](mailto:morris.panitz@aju.edu).

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