A Jewish Spring

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As we prepare to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Jewish independence, we are consumed by a swirl of confusing emotions. We continue to suffer internal strife, as our country is badly split over the future shape of our democracy. In the wake of social unrest both our economy and our international standing have been destabilized. Believing that we are vulnerable, our numerous enemies have become emboldened to attack us. Worst of all, a recent wave of terror has taken dozens of lives. It hasn’t been an easy two months in the land of Israel, and this is certainly not how we envisioned the celebration of a major national milestone. Our 75th Day of Independence was meant to be more joyous and less fraught. Life is never as neat as we imagine it to be.

History provides perspective. People of *emuna* take the long view of Jewish history and are less distressed by momentary lapses or setbacks. Jewish history is a long and protracted course requiring faith and patience. Taking the long view of Jewish history can help us navigate our current crisis and restore some of the luster of Yom Ha’atzmaut.

Throughout Jewish history, the *sefirat ha’omer* period of our calendar has undergone massive shifts, which themselves reflect the revolutions of Jewish fate. The bittersweet spring segment of our calendar has been repeatedly modified and is still under construction.

Joy and Triumph

Initially, the months between Pesach and Shavuot were a festive period, as we recalled *yetziat mitzray’im*, and counted down the days to Shavuot and *matan Torah*. Twice, within a two-month period we pilgrimaged to Yerushalayim for *aliya la’regel* and national celebration. The weather was mild, and the national mood was cheerful as we celebrated successful harvests by delivering tasty *bikurim* fruits to the *mikdash*. It was a period of national solidarity and historical pride.

Even during our seventy-year exile in Bavel, this period remained jubilant, as the dramatic Purim miracles unfolded during these months. The initial faceoff with Haman occurred during Pesach, while the ensuing Jewish recovery transpired in the weeks leading up to Shavuot. In the first stage of Jewish history this joyous period was punctuated by glorious milestones of Jewish triumph. *Sefirat ha’omer* counting was a tally of pride and of optimism. Tragically, things would quickly turn sour.

Exile, Chapter One

As Jewish exile commenced, these months changed their complexion. In the 2nd century, the Bar Kochba uprising offered a last-ditch effort to restore Jewish sovereignty, after the vicious Roman conquest of Israel. Rabbi Akiva, the supreme Torah scholar of his day, supported this insurrection, believing in its Messianic potential. Suddenly, during the interval between Pesach and Shavuot, 24,000 of his talmidim died from mysterious causes. Perhaps they were killed by a contagious pandemic or, alternatively, they may have been brutally massacred in battle by the Romans. Either way, their jarring deaths signaled that Jewish history was about to shift. The sudden death of these prominent scholars became a dreadful milestone, indicating that the long night of Jewish *galut* was about to begin.

These two months of spring, which had been designated for celebration, were now scarred by death and darkness. Jewish history was spiraling, and with it, these months became marred with Jewish blood.

Exile, Chapter Two

For approximately the next 1000 years we were scattered in exile, but enjoyed relatively calm and stable conditions. By and large, we lived in peaceful co-existence with our hosts, first in Persia and, ultimately, among various Moslem countries. We had been dislocated from our homeland and robbed of our sovereignty, but we didn’t face excessive cruelty or persecution. Institutionalized antisemitism had yet to rear its ugly face. Conditions were about to, once again change, as a bloody tragedy would launch a thousand years of hatred and persecution against our people.

In 1096 the first Christian Crusade was launched, aiming to recapture Jerusalem from Moslem occupation. Jewish communities, primarily in Germany and France, were savagely attacked by the rampaging crusaders. Jews were brutally murdered and forcibly baptized. 1096 was merely the opening bell. Over the next three centuries at least four additional Crusades subjected defenseless Jewish communities to further atrocities. Ultimately, various legal decrees were legislated against Jews leading to their eventual expulsion from Western Europe. Jews were expelled from France in 1181, from England in 1290, and most infamously, from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492.

The spring-time Crusades of 1096 marked the emergence of institutionalized Christian antisemitism, a historical monstrosity which would hunt us and haunt us for the next millennia, culminating in the gruesome horrors of the Holocaust.

These two spring-time tragedies became grotesque milestones of Jewish exile. The death of Rabbi Akiva’s students announced the start of our long exile, while the Crusades launched 900 years of discrimination, hatred, and bloodshed.

These dual traumas converted a season of joy into two months of grief. The customs of mourning during the *sefirat ha’omer* are a sad reflection of the ironic and tragic transformation of this period. Thousands of years ago, spring was our happiest season, but the ravages of Jewish exile had smothered our happiness with sorrow and misery.

Renovating History

Jewish history is resurgent and so is its calendar. Over the past century a revitalized Jewish spring would restore the luster of these two months.

In 1948, on the 5th day of Iyar, Ben Gurion declared Jewish Independence and renewed Jewish sovereignty. The proximity of our modern Independence Day to Pesach, our ancient Independence Day, isn’t coincidence. Nothing in Jewish history is. Thousands of years ago, during this month, Jewish soldiers and scholars perished, but now Israelis were dancing in the tree-lined streets of Israel.

History wasn’t finished with this month, and nineteen years later Hashem provided even greater reason to celebrate this month. Hashem created His natural world in six days, and He recreated history in the six days of June 1967. After the six-day war we returned to Jerusalem and to the hinterland of Jewish history, restoring Jewish pride and reaffirming Jewish destiny. These miracles unfolded one week before Shavuot, again, an overlap which isn’t coincidental. A thousand years ago, during this pre-Shavuot week, Jews were being slaughtered in the Rhinelands of Germany, but in 1967, paratroopers were blowing the shofar standing under the Kotel, the last vestige of our *mikdash*. Joy and celebration had been restored to the Jewish spring after two thousand years of sadness and horror.

As we begin this month of renewed Jewish celebration don’t ignore the long and frustrating odyssey of Jewish history. Our journey hasn’t always comfortable, and these iconic months have been a microcosm of our convoluted journey. We have now returned and, as we renew our destiny, we are also revamping our calendar. Short of supernatural divine intervention nothing historical happens immediately. This reconstruction project will take time and we may suffer setbacks.

These months continue to be complicated and bittersweet. However, for so many years they were only bitter. Now they are bittersweet and are more sweet than bitter. Taste each flavor of the Jewish spring but maintain proper proportion between the two.