

DOES ISRAEL FIT?

An Israel rabbi meets an American publisher ready to embrace his new book on Jewish holidays—except for one chapter: Yom Ha'atzmaut. Their exchange unfolds into a deeper question about where Israel belongs in Jewish life today, and whether spirituality and nationhood can still share the same page.

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The elevator was making my ears pop. I had flown in from Israel for my meeting with the only publisher interested in my new book. I'm not a first-time author – you may have heard of my best-selling kids' book "My BMitzvah," and my illustrated guide to creating your own rituals. But none of my previous successes had gotten me a meeting for this book. I'd begun to wonder if American publishers didn't want to publish an Israeli rabbi. Until now.

Sam invited me into her office on the 32nd floor of the Manhattan office building.

It was even more positive than I'd expected. "Rabbi Ilan," she began, "This book has huge potential. You really breathe new life into the whole ancient tradition of Jewish holidays. It could be a hit."

Wow. She liked the book! She got right down to talk about what artwork we might include. I suggested a few artists that I know. She jotted down some notes. It was a dream of a meeting. Then just as I thought it was coming to an end, Sam said, "Of course I see that you've included a chapter on Yom HaAtzmaut, Israeli Independence Day. That will obviously have to go."

"I'm sorry?"

Sam stopped, took off her glasses and smiled kindly.

"Well, you know, it's not really a *Jewish* festival, is it?"

“Oh I see,” I said calmly, warming up to my favorite theme, “Israel’s Independence Day does certainly seem different from the other festivals like Hanukkah or Passover. But that’s what makes it fascinating: That mix of religion and nation. When Jews all over the world mark it, on its Hebrew date, with its own prayers in synagogue—”

“Yes, I see that,” acknowledged Sam, with her kind smile beginning to trouble me. “It is certainly very interesting. But at the end of the day it was invented by Israeli politicians, not by rabbis, right? And barbecues and beer don’t seem to have the ritual magic of a sukkah or a seder night, do they?”

Just as I was about to reply, Sam gently cut me off.

“Rabbi, this book is so beautiful, so uplifting and positive. The minute we put Israel in there, it just crashes to the ground. We publish books on spirituality, not politics.”

“I see,” I said, though I wasn’t entirely sure that I did.

“Listen, I’d like to offer you a contract here and now. Just without Yom HaAztmaut. I have to be realistic. With all its stunning illustrations and images -- which I really love -- this book is going to cost a great deal to produce. We need to be absolutely sure that the sales will justify that investment. We can’t take any risks. I personally don’t have anything against Israel, mind, but it’s the market that decides, and the market is telling us ‘Israel’s crazy! I want my Jewish life back!’”

“I see,” I said again. “Um, ok.”

“So, I’ll get you a contract in the next few days, and we’ll move forward,” Sam announced, and then she thanked me and showed me the way out.

That elevator ride down to the ground floor was the longest of my life. 32 floors of looking a gift-horse in the mouth.

On the one hand, I’m Israeli, so Israel is in the book anyway, with or without Yom HaAtzmaut. And the chapters on Chanukah, Passover, Tu B’Shvat – they’re basically holidays that, historically, took place in the Land of Israel or ended up in the Land of Israel. Aren’t they?

On the other hand, what about the message I’d be sending? Did I really want a popular book confirming to Jews that Israel doesn’t count? That Judaism has nothing to do with half the Jews in the world and where they live?

But then with this publisher the book could really make an impact on Jewish life. Should I really let Israel get in the way of that?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Should Rabbi Ilan remove Yom HaAtzmaut from the book and take the book deal?
- (Why) Do you consider Yom HaAtzmaut a Jewish holiday? A secular or religious holiday?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

- When, if ever, should references to Israel be removed from Jewish text or discourse?
- To what extent does our connection to the State of Israel benefit or detract from Jewish life in the United States?



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