



## ICJW Bea Zucker Calendar Study Series

### “Feminist Inspiration for Living on the Jewish Cycle”

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#### 1 Yom Ha'atzmaut — Israeli (Women's) Independence

##### Context

On the fifth day of the Hebrew month of Iyar, May 14, 1948, representatives of the *Yishuv*—the Jewish residents of what was then known as “Palestine”—declared the establishment of the State of Israel. The declaration put an end to two millennia of foreign rule - from the onset of Roman imperial rule during the second Jerusalem Temple period in 63 B.C.E. through British imperial control under a colonial mandate.

In Israel, Yom Ha'atzmaut is a national holiday that arrives with spring and wild poppies. Many Israeli communities hold festivities, some pray special thanksgiving prayers, some party in the streets; many families and friends gather in fields and parks for picnics.

Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrates Jewish sovereignty in Israel. It is difficult for us to grasp the revolution that the State of Israel represents not only for the Jewish People, but for humanity. From Ben Gurion to Binyamin Netanyahu, prime ministers draw on a vision of the prophet Isaiah to express Israel's commitment to contribute to humanity,

I will make you a *light to the nations* . . . . (Isaiah 49:6).

As one of the great human civilizations, Judaism has never before had the possibility to inform the public domain of a full-fledged, autonomous nation-state. The State of Israel proposes a unique opportunity and challenge to the Jewish People: to apply on a national scale the tremendous creativity of Jewish culture to such diverse fields of public practice and policy as religion and spirituality, arts, law, health care, science, philosophy, economics, politics, and ethics. The Zionist movement and the creation of Israel conceive not only a remedy to persecution, but a modern expression of the collective agency of Jewry. Zionism breathes fresh life into ancient language and offers tradition fresh soil in which to take root.

The meanings and practices of Yom Ha'atzmaut in Israel and abroad evolve as we work toward the lofty vision of the State of Israel expressed in the 1948 Declaration of Independence. Here we explore how we might make Yom Ha'atzmaut more relevant, meaningful, and inspiring for communities throughout the Jewish world with a special interest in women's roles.

##### Text

###### Excerpt from Israeli Declaration of Independence

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the

קטע מתוך הכרזה על הקמת מדינת ישראל  
מדינת ישראל תהא פתוחה לעליה יהודית  
ולקיבוץ גלויות; תשקוד על פיתוח הארץ  
לטובת כל תושביה; תהא מושתתה על  
יסודות החירות, הצדק והשלום לאור  
חזונם של נביאי ישראל; תקיים שויון

prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations

זכויות חברתי ומדיני גמור לכל אזרחיה בלי הבדל דת, גזע ומין; תבטיח חופש דת, מצפון, לשון, חינוך ותרבות; תשמור על המקומות הקדושים של כל הדתות; ותהיה נאמנה לעקרונותיה של מגילת האומות המאוחדות.

## Background

The Israeli Declaration of Independence declares the principle of “equality of social and political rights” for all - women and men.



During the pioneering period, from 1880 through to the establishment of the State in 1948, women were actively involved in all sectors of the labor force—agriculture, industry, commerce and trade, professions, and services, and a small percentage in construction and public works ([“Women in the Workforce”](#) by Hanna Bar-Yishay). Then, like now, women received lower wages than men doing the same work, and fewer women were employed in the higher-income sectors. Though women were under-represented in governance and public decision-making, and their names are poorly remembered, women had a major impact on the pre-State Yishuv and the infant state (see, for example Naomi Chazan, former Knesset Deputy Speaker, [“Women in](#)

[Israel: In Politics & Public Life](#),” Shulamit Reinharz, [“Timeline of Women and Women’s Issues in the Yishuv and Israel”](#)).



In the *Yishuv*, some pioneers believed that women and men were to work equally, side-by-side to build what would become the State of Israel. Eastern European Labor Zionism professed women's full equality. The image to the left depicts this ideal - women and men *chalutzim*-pioneers of the second wave of immigration-*aliyah* together on a break from their field work at Migdal in 1912. Finding

that this ideal was not sufficiently fulfilled, during the second and third *aliya*, European women created a feminist movement to secure “full and equal participation in the process of Jewish national reconstruction” (Dafna Izraeli, “The Zionist Women’s Movement in Palestine, 1911-1927: A Sociological Analysis,” *Signs*, 1981 7(1), 87). Relative to prevalent patriarchal gender roles in their communities of origin, women from Maghrebi, Sephardi and Oriental communities achieved considerable empowerment in Erez Israel. According to Michal Ben Ya’acov, “The women immigrated (literally, “ascended”) to the Holy Land in order to attain a higher level of holiness and to strengthen their faith, not to be part of a

social revolution.” However, along with the poverty that many suffered, single women, particularly widows found more independence and freedom than in the lands from which they immigrated (Michal Ben Ya'akov, [“Widows in North African Jewish communities of late Ottoman Palestine”](#)).

In 1994, at the tenth annual Israeli feminist conference, a group of Mizrahi women disrupted the proceedings. Dissatisfied with the exclusion of their concerns about racism and the “vicious circle of poverty” from the agenda of their Ashkenazi sisters, they spilt. While Ashkenazi women invested in a highly publicized campaign to have women accepted to the pilot training program of the Israel Defense Forces, Mizrahi women were dedicated to improving work conditions in factories and encouraging more women to complete elementary school. In 1995, an independent feminist conference launched to discuss and develop a feminist agenda rooted in Mizrahi women's experiences and their own disadvantages and aspirations in Israeli society.

This rupture in Israeli feminism corresponded with a global trend. The feminist movement struggled to better include voices of class, color, and “peripheral” locations. In 1999, Mizrahi Israeli feminists together with representatives of other marginalized groups of women such as Ethiopian and Russian immigrants, Palestinian Israelis, and lesbians founded Ahoti to address shared concerns - deprivation and exploitation. They expanded the Israeli feminist agenda to broader, more inclusive working women's issues, rights, and representation – economic, legal and political. Ahoti first raised the feminist protest against the effects of globalization and privatization in Israel. With some support from Ahoti, in 2003, Vicki Knafo led a single mothers' march from Mitzpe Ramon in the Negev desert to Jerusalem and encamped outside the Knesset. Havatzelet Ingbar led a sit-in of women and children at the Mitzpe Atzmaut textile factory in 2000 that enabled the women to take over the factory as owners and managers. The factory outcome was less than financially satisfactory. The women did not have the managerial experience or political savvy to succeed with the business, at a time that the textile industry was migrating to cheap labor sites in the “developing” world. Though the outcomes cannot be measured in economic terms, the process of empowerment was immensely instructive. (See Henriette Dahan Kalev, [“Breaking Their Silence: Mizrahi Women and the Israeli Feminist Movement”](#), 2007)

Israeli women continue to contribute to all sectors of society and to serve in public positions. Golda Meir served as prime minister, Dorit Beinisch was president of the Supreme Court, Tzippi Livni, Zehava Gal-On, and Shelly Yachimovich have led major political parties. Ruhama Avraham Balila and Dalia Itzik number among the women who have served as cabinet ministers. Ada Yonath is a prize-winning scientist. Lea Goldberg, Rachel, and Dalia Ravikovitch are great poets of Israel; Bracha Serri won the government prize for Hebrew poetry and literature; Ayelet Tsabari is an international acclaimed short story writer. Israel Prize laureate, Anna Ticho painted iconic Jerusalem landscapes. The Mizrahi Women's schools have been awarded the Ministry of Education's Religious Education Prize. These names are not intended to be inclusive, but to allude to the breadth of Israeli women's leadership and offerings.



One of the two women signatories to the

Declaration of Independence, during the 1950's, Rachel Kagan Cohen imagined women serving as combat soldiers. Today, her vision is closer to achievement than ever. According to the IDF spokesperson, women are 34% of all soldiers, 57% of all officers. 92% of positions in the IDF are open to women. (See this video about [women paratrooper instructors.](#))

Like most advanced Western societies, Israel has yet to actualize the full equality of women. The mainly ultra-Orthodox state religious establishment is an area of particular inequality. Feminism exposes the tension between open civil democracy that ought to uphold women's full rights and religious practices that too often contradict them. Under *sacred* aegis, Israeli society tolerates the exclusion of women from office, decision-making, representation, and funding in the religious sphere. Many religious institutions bear coercively on women's personal lives and undermine women's status and self-image throughout society. The official rabbinate, religious councils, political parties, authorities, and myriad service and resource providers related to marriage, divorce, burial, prayer, Torah study etc. discriminate against women. Some apply social, political and economic pressure to erase women and their voices from the public domain.

In recent years, a trend toward women's religious empowerment challenges the exclusive authenticity of patriarchal ultra-Orthodox Judaism. An unprecedented number of learning institutions offers women the option to engage in Torah study – Matan, Nishmat, Lindenbaum, She'arim, Bina, and a host of other *midrashot*-frameworks for advanced Torah study by women thrive throughout the country. Women of the Wall take the initiative to liberate public sacred space from the hegemony of male religious authority and enable more diverse religious expressions, particularly those that empower women's public leadership and participation. [Kolech - Religious Women's Forum](#) works for gender equality and against all forms of gender oppression and violence, particularly under religious authority.

In terms of education and health, Israeli women and men have equal opportunities. However, Israeli women suffer similar disadvantages to women throughout the West in the economy. [Israeli women earn only about 60% of what men earn](#) (2012). In the same year, American [female chief executives earned only 69% as much as men](#). In the [European Union economy as a whole, in 2012, women's gross hourly earnings were on average 16.4% below those of men.](#)

One of the reasons that economic disparities persist is that men continue to dominate positions of political power, to rule according to patriarchal principles, to distribute resources unfairly, and to embroil humanity in conflict and destruction. In 2013, Israelis elected more women to Knesset than ever - 23 percent - overtaking the United States where only 18 percent of the Congress are women. However, 23 percent is insufficient.

By means of self-imposed party regulations to close the gendered power gap, some using a “zipper system” which reserves every other position for male and female candidates, in 2006, Sweden elected 47 percent female national parliamentarians in the Rikstag (up from 14% in 1971). The goal of the Swedish policy has been to “reach gender equality in a deeper sense.” Sweden implements landmark gender equality legislation and policies in interconnected political, social and economic fields, for example, the “Women’s Peace” and “Protection of Women’s Integrity” reforms. (See [Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers](#)”, [Co-ordination Action on Human Rights Violations](#)”). Sweden illumines and addresses intersecting structures of inequality - gendered power, class/wealth imbalance,

and the uneven gendered burden for care-giving as cultural keys to the advancement of responsible civil society. These initiatives are instructive for Israel, and for humanity at large.

Israeli feminists tackle current difficult realities using the instruments of democracy – the courts, lobbying, media, education, arts etc. In the Middle East where many regimes repress women as official state policy, Israeli society is unique – view this [interactive map](#) illustrating the findings of the annual World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index.



On Yom Ha'atzmaut let us celebrate Israeli open, dynamic and vibrant civil democracy and support women pursuing freedom from all forms of gender-based oppression and visions of ever more robust equality of opportunity, leadership, and power in all fields of endeavor.

## Observance and Practices

The celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut is work-in-progress and invites development. Like the State of Israel whose birthday Yom Ha'atzmaut marks, the day has many dimensions - among them, personal, political, historical, artistic, spiritual and religious.

Some Diaspora communities gather together their denominations and organizations for joint Israel Day ceremonies and festivities, solidarity parades, Israeli cultural and culinary events. Sometimes these events take place in public and outdoor venues. View this [African Zionist street celebration](#). Since the State of Israel affirms, among many things, public Jewish life, these celebrations capture an important element of Israeli independence – a collective and joyous sense of unfettered Jewish Peoplehood. Women should be fully equal, visible and audible contributors to and leaders in the conception and implementation of Yom Ha'atzmaut ceremonies and celebrations.

Similarly to the rabbinic sages instituting Hanukkah and Purim - festivals to celebrate redemptive events in the post-biblical period of Jewish life – modern religious authorities have proposed religious observances for Yom Ha'atzmaut. As Esther was a leader of the Purim liberation, and Judith in the Chanuka tradition, women's roles in the creation and sustenance of the State of Israel must also be studied, recognized and taught. Ancient sages ordain the recitation of Hallel, psalms of thanksgiving, on many occasions of distress and deliverance. The Talmud declares, 'On every occasion that Israel is in distress and then delivered, they are to recite the *Hallel* (Pesahim 116a).

This is a recording of a Tel Aviv Yemenite community, [Magen David reciting Hallel](#) reciting Hillel on the eve of Yom Ha'atzmaut. Here is a neo-hasidic community singing the evening Hallel with musical instruments, [Beit Knesset Kol Rina](#). Since there is not an accessible recording of women's voices singing Hallel on Yom Ha'atzmaut, this is a snippet of [Women of the Wall singing Hallel](#) on a Rosh Hodesh.

Modeled on Hanukkah and Purim prayers, special “*Al haNisim* – For the Miracles” prayers

have been composed for Yom Ha'atzmaut to acknowledge and offer gratitude for the miracle of the birth of the State of Israel. [Here](#) is a Hebrew text with English translation with an inclusive formulation, "With song and dance, women and children, the old and the young, celebrated on the streets with joy and rejoicing." [This blog post](#) discusses sources and different versions, though it refers consistently only to our *fathers* rather than our *ancestors*.

Whether in a religious or secular context, singing is one core element of Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration. [Here](#) is an assortment of Israeli popular Yom Ha'atzmaut music in various settings, including a street social protest event in Tel Aviv, an [informal dance piece in New Jersey](#). This is [an original song](#) by a school group.

In terms of taking the celebration into our homes, sources suggest a festive meal on the evening of Yom Ha'atzmaut. These are some special customs that might inspire our observances today:

- Spread a white cloth, place a Channuka menorah on the table and light eight candles. (told of Rabbi Moshe-Zvi Neriah, a religious Zionist educator and politician in the *Tikkun Yom Ha'atzmaut* published by the WZO in 1956)
- Recite a special Yom Ha'atzmaut *Kiddush* – blessing over wine – [here is a recording of a Kiddush by Yakov Maoz with the text](#)
- Recite the *Shehekheyanu* - blessing over a new fruit to express gratitude for reaching this time
- Make the *Hamotzi* blessing over three *matzot*-unleavened bread and one loaf of leavened bread to remind of the *korban todah*-the thanksgiving offering once offered in the Jerusalem Temple which included leavened and unleavened bread. (from a "*Service for Yom Ha'atzmaut*" composed by members of the Italian Synagogue in Jerusalem in 1964)
- Enjoy a splendid *Seudat Hodaya* – Festive Meal of Gratitude

### Questions for Discussion

Explore how you relate to the State of Israel as a citizen of another country? Do you take the existence of Israel for granted? Discuss the idea that Israel is a revolutionary force in Judaism and in the unfolding of Jewish history.

Relative to your experience in your country, how do you see women's roles and status evolving in Israel? Compare influences that affect women's lives, opportunities, and contributions in your environment and in Israel.

About her 1919 visit to Palestine, Vera Weizmann writes,

We were very impressed by the hard work done in rebuilding Palestine by the devoted *halutzot* [women pioneers]...but we... thought these enthusiastic, idealistic women were mortgaging their future motherhood and even risking their health for this principle of equality: they were working ten or twelve hours a day breaking rocks and stones for road-making and mending, carrying heavy loads, performing superhuman tasks. (*Impossible Takes Longer*, 94.)

Throughout the unfolding of Zionism, women's roles have been under negotiation. Yom Ha'atzmaut is an appropriate time to revisit women's evolving roles in Israeli society. What is your view about women's full participation in hard manual work, and in military activities?

Do you consider men's and women's roles and responsibilities in society to be equal? Under what conditions or by what criteria ought they to be different? Explain how you relate these questions to the continued development of Zionism particularly, and to your experience outside of Israel.

With particular attention to women's experience, propose some ways that you might create and/or enrich your Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations. Some examples might be -

- to learn more and share about women's issues and experiences in Israel, and connect with women's initiatives in Israel with which you identify
- to compose an intention, prayer or ritual that expresses your aspirations for women's fuller liberation in the State of Israel
- to contribute toward the gender equality of your community's festivities.

### **Summary of Issues**

Israeli independence is founded on the labors and contributions of women alongside men. Israel's flourishing and progress depend on the full participation and leadership of women in all spheres of Israeli society. On Yom Ha'atzmaut, we take stock of women's roles and formulate intentions to free ourselves from gender-based oppressions and toward more egalitarian economic, political, and religious power distribution for the benefit of Israel and humanity as a whole.

### **Methods & Observations**

Including the modern celebration of Yom Ha'atzmaut among the festivals affirms our worthiness to build the calendar as Jewish experience unfolds. Since it is a modern holiday, and its observance and celebration are less formed and fixed, Yom Ha'atzmaut presents a particular opportunity for women to take initiative to create and contribute toward meaningful Jewish public and private observances.

### **Contact**

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