

Israel Independence Day/Memorial Day

(Yom Ha'atzmaut/ Yom Hazikaron)



Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israeli Independence Day celebrates the anniversary of the creation of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948 (or, according to the Jewish calendar, the 5th of *Iyyar* in 5708). David Ben Gurion, became Israel's first Prime Minister. From then on, this date became a national holiday, celebrated in Israel and by Jews and Zionists around the world. Yom Ha'atzmaut in Israel is always preceded by Yom Hazikaron, Israel's Memorial Day for the fallen soldiers. The message of linking these two days is clear: Israelis owe their independence--the very existence of the state--to



the soldiers who sacrificed their lives for it. A ceremony takes place shortly after sundown on Mount Herzl in Jerusalem in which the flag is raised from half staff to the top of the pole. The president of Israel delivers a speech of congratulations, and soldiers representing the army, navy, and air force parade with their flags. The evening parade is followed by a torch lighting (*hadlakat masuot*) ceremony, which marks the country's achievements in all spheres of life.



In Israel, Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day) is a formal holiday; so almost everyone has the day off and the holiday is celebrated with fireworks, barbecues, and public concerts. Many army bases are opened for civilians to visit which display the



achievements of the Israeli Defense Forces. In major cities such as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, nighttime festivities are focused on the main streets where crowds gather to watch public shows offered for free by the municipalities and the government. In rural communities, many people spend the night dancing and singing songs. *Yom Ha'atzmaut* is concluded with the ceremony of granting the "Israel Prize" recognizing individual Israelis for their unique contribution to the country's culture, science, arts, and the humanities.

Some congregations have the custom of adding liturgy to the regular services on Yom Ha'atzmaut, to commemorate the miraculous nature of Israel's victory over its foes. The religious character of *Yom Ha'atzmaut* is still in the process of formation, and is subject to debate and it should be noted that most Israelis do not consider *Yom*

Ha'atzmaut a religious holiday at all. Outside Israel, Jewish communities host parties and gatherings to celebrate Israel. Often, the focus of these events is on Israeli culture, everything from classic Israeli foods such as hummus, falafel, schnitzel, (breaded and fried boneless meat) and shawarma, (meat cooked on a spit), to Israeli dance, Israeli music, and all things Hebrew. People wear blue and white, and wave Israeli flags.



Most Jewish communities around the world have also incorporated *Yom Ha'atzmaut* into their calendars, though it has become customary for some to hold the public celebrations on the closest Sunday in order to attract more participation. For American Jews, celebrating *Yom Ha'atzmaut* has been a way to express solidarity with the State of Israel and to strengthen their alliance with it. In many communities, it is one of few occasions in which Jewish organizations and synagogues of different ideologies and denominations cooperate in forming a common celebration. In many North American congregations, including MRT, the joint public celebration often is augmented by a religious service. In some cases, this would occur on the Shabbat closest to *Yom Ha'atzmaut* and would consist of additional readings added to the service and, usually, the singing of Hatikvah (the Israeli national anthem).