



# Taking a Personal Stand on Israel: A Yom Ha-Atzma'ut Resource from ARZA

ARZA is the national membership organization connecting American Reform Jews and Israel through education, advocacy and travel.  
ARZA, 633 Third Avenue New York, NY 10017 212.650.4280 [www.arza.org](http://www.arza.org)

Yom Ha-Atzma'ut, Israel Independence Day is a time for joy and celebration. But it can also be an opportunity for reflection and discussion on the role Israel plays in our lives as Reform Jews in the Diaspora. We hope that these materials will help provoke thoughtful discourse on some of the tough questions we face on Yom Ha-Atzma'ut: What does the State of Israel mean to us? What is our role, if any, in its life? Does it, or can it, make any claims on us? As Jews who have chosen to live in the Diaspora, what responsibility, if any, do we have toward the State?



Just as these pieces reflect very personal responses to the issues they are likely to raise a variety of issues, emotions and opinions from participants. We urge facilitators to make sure that the venue is a safe one, in which dialogue and debate are respectful and caring, and in which participants are encouraged to listen actively to one another and are allowed to express themselves freely.

## There are three parts to these materials:

- **Part One:** The well known Israeli poem, "The Silver Platter" by Natan Alterman
- **Part Two:** A reflection on the poem and its significance for today by a young Israeli Jew
- **Part Three:** A reflection on our relationship with Israel by a young American Jew
- **Discussion Questions:** To help guide your thinking about these materials



### Part One

We start with “The Silver Platter,” a well known poem written by Natan Alterman shortly after the War of Independence. The work served in many ways as the script for the people’s narrative of what had happened during the fight for Israeli sovereignty and survival. As you read the poem, think about the specific images used. What mood or tone is the poet trying to create? Does he succeed?

## The Silver Platter

Natan Alterman (1910-1970)

Translated from the Hebrew by David P. Stern

“A State is not handed to a people on a silver platter”

-- Chaim Weizmann, first President of Israel

...And the land will grow still  
Crimson skies dimming, misting  
Slowly paling again  
Over smoking frontiers

Dressed in battle gear, dirty  
Shoes heavy with grime  
On the path they will climb up  
While their lips remain sealed

Then a nation in tears  
And amazed at this matter  
Will ask: who are you?  
And the two will then say

As the nation stands up  
Torn at heart but existing  
To receive its first wonder  
In two thousand years

To change garb, to wipe brow  
They have not yet found time  
Still bone weary from days  
And from nights in the field

With soft voice: We--  
Are the silver platter  
On which the Jews’ state  
Was presented today

As the moment draws near  
It will rise, darkness facing  
Stand straight in the moonlight  
In terror and joy

Full of endless fatigue  
And all drained of emotion  
Yet the dew of their youth  
Is still seen on their head

Then they fall back in darkness  
As the dazed nation looks  
And the rest can be found  
In the history books.

...When across from it step out  
Towards it slowly pacing  
In plain sight of all  
A young girl and a boy

Thus like statues they stand  
Stiff and still with no motion  
And no sign that will show  
If they live or are dead



### Part Two

The first reflection on the meaning of Israel comes from Hanan Cidor, a young shaliach (emissary) working with the Youth Division of the URJ. Keep in mind that the writer was born in the 1980s, that is to say, decades after the declaration of Israel’s Independence.

## Israel from an Israeli’s Perspective Hanan Cidor

In the first decade of Israel’s existence there was a serious and credible threat to the very existence of the newborn Jewish State. For Israel’s leaders and its entire people this wasn’t a theoretical discussion but rather a harsh question of whether or not this miracle would still exist in the following year. The sac-

rifice demanded by Israel's civilian and military population in order to secure the country's survival was the ultimate one. In the war of independence, for example, the people of Jerusalem were forced to live under an Arab siege, completely cut off from the rest of the Jewish settlements, almost starving and eagerly waiting for reinforcements to arrive with supplies. In what was the longest and harshest of all of Israel's wars, nearly 6,000 soldiers lost their lives, an incomprehensible 1% of the entire Jewish population in the country.

This reality, as hard to cope with as it was, made things pretty clear, in a neat black and white sense. If you wanted to support Israel in a meaningful way, make a substantial contribution and bind your fate with it then your course of action was obvious - leave your life, join the army and fight for its survival. Israel's history is full of stories about young Israelis and volunteers from abroad that left their relatively comfortable lives and joined the IDF to fight for Israel. This sacrifice and commitment by those who were considered to be the future of Israel inspired Jews all across the world and in Israel itself. This inspiration and the terrible price that came with it manifested itself in many ways. One example is Natan Alterman's poem "The Silver Platter" in which he speaks in the names of those fallen soldiers, saying that they were the silver platter on which Israel was presented to the Jewish people, asking not to be forgotten.

Today in many ways reality is different. Although still involved in an armed and violent conflict, Israel's existence is of no question and it is clear that even with the dire threat that countries like Iran pose, the solution to it would not include full scale war with a huge amount of casualties but rather a technological or even diplomatic one. This situation, as welcomed and preferred as it is, raises an important question. Now that things are not so clear cut and Israel is no longer fighting

for its survival, what would actually constitute a meaningful contribution? What is the modern manifestation of a Zionist ideology and sentiment? What is the modern "silver platter"? Is such an image even needed anymore?

To me as an Israeli the answer to that question is clear. For me there is no other way than deciding to live my life and someday raise my children in Israel. My idea of a meaningful contribution is to take an active role in the shaping of the Jewish state according to my pluralistic, progressive, Jewish values. That is how I was brought up and this is how I want to influence my surroundings, and hopefully the entire country. Taking part in "binyan Yisrael" (the building of Israel)



is my way of making a meaningful, substantial contribution. I see no better way to honor the memories of those who gave their lives to secure Israel's survival than to make absolutely sure that their sacrifice was worthwhile by doing everything I can to fulfill the dream and promise that is Israel.

That said, I do understand that like everything else in life this idea can also have different perspectives. Since I was born and raised in Israel this is the context in which I live. For someone born and raised in the U.S. on the other hand, the context is completely different. It would be ridiculous on my part to declare that the only way to make an honest, meaningful contribution to Israel would be by making Aliyah. I recognize that there are few harder things to do than to wake up one day and leave everything you've ever known and move to a completely different country. So, although I do feel that doing it would constitute the highest form of commitment, I realize that there must be other ways.

What are those "other ways" then? Well, I feel that just as my response was a reflection of my individual take on things, so should everyone

else's be. One thing is certain though, in this day and age when answers are a lot more obscure, everyone who wants to be considered as a Zionist should constantly ask himself this question, how can I do everything I can in order to make sure that the "silver platter" on which this unbelievable creation was presented to us would not have been a worthless sacrifice?

## Questions

1. How does Hanan relate to the tone created in "The Silver Platter"? What factors do you imagine contribute to his reactions?
2. Are there analogies in American life to the evolutionary process that leads us from Alterman's poem to Hanan's present day candid description of his own feelings?



### Part Three

We turn now to a reflection on Israel's meaning written by a young American rabbinical student. As you read it, try to hear the underlying values in his words. Try to locate his areas of greatest comfort and his areas of greatest discomfort.

## Israel from a Reform Rabbinical Student's Perspective Eli Freedman

Like many American Reform Jews, I had no connection whatsoever to Israel growing up. I knew Israel was the spiritual homeland of the Jewish people but I didn't know what that meant. So when I decided to go to rabbinical school and realized that I would be spending a year in Israel, I had mixed feelings. On one hand, I realized that Israel is a huge part of Judaism and as a rabbinical student I really should live there for some extended period of time. On the other hand, I only saw Israel as a chance to work on my Hebrew and visit another country; "this should be fun," I thought, "new food, new people, a great travel experience..." - but nothing more.

I lived in a studio apartment in Nachla'ot (near the shuk in Jerusalem) and soon realized how truly amazing Israel really is. The language, the sites, the history, the people, the culture, my crazy 83 year old Yemenite neighbor, everything - I fell in love with it all. And I can't wait to go back!

While in Israel, I also took a real interest in Israeli politics. Before I left, I knew a little bit about Israeli politics; I knew that I didn't agree with the security fence, I knew that I wanted a two state solution, I knew that Reform Jews didn't have enough rights. But once in Israel, I lived the politics. It wasn't about what I read in the newspaper anymore, it was about what I was experiencing in my everyday life.

There was a nice, old Palestinian man from Bethlehem who used to clean my apartment once a week. My neighbor set me up with him (they were old friends) and she told me I was doing a real mitzvah in hiring him because he really needed the money. One week he never showed up at my place. I asked my neighbor what happened and she said that he never made it through the checkpoint that day (it was too crowded or closed) and he couldn't come into Jerusalem. I was so angry at the Israeli government - why did they have to have all these stupid checkpoints?! I wasn't just upset because my apartment was dirty, but because this kind, old, hard-working man was being humiliated, dehumanized and denied his inalienable human-rights.

A few weeks later, I woke up to a text message alert from school that said not to go to the center of town or any markets that day as there was a serious security threat in Jerusalem. I walked straight to school, kept off the buses, and went straight home. I got a text update later that same day that the terrorists had been caught at a checkpoint heading into Jerusalem from the West Bank and it was safe to go out again. Wow, how happy was I with the amazing Israeli government!

These two stories show that Israeli politics is a lot more complex than we realize while sitting here

in the United States; there are a number of ways to view every story and it is impossible to ever really know the truth behind the political situation. We can only live it and hope that our experiences clarify our viewpoint.

Now I am back in the States, and I find myself with a real dilemma. How do I deal with Israel as an American Jew? I am not an Israeli, I did not serve in the army, I do not pay taxes and I no longer live there. Who am I to tell Israel what to do? Yet we tell Israel what to do all the time; in sermons, in teaching, in Shabbat dinner conversation – “Israel should have never withdrawn from Gaza...” “Israel shouldn’t be putting up a security fence...” We, as American Jews, feel like we not only have the right to tell Israel what to do, but that Israel must listen.

As citizens of the world, we can all say whatever we want. It is our duty and responsibility to speak out against injustices in the world. But what I am talking about with Israel is not the same. The difference is that I am a Jew. I do have some ownership of Israel, don’t I? Israel is my homeland just as much as it is any other Jewish person’s anywhere in the world and I want to have a say in what happens in my homeland.

So how do we deal with this dilemma? One solution that many people propose is, “It’s simple - make aliyah!” If you move to Israel then of course you can have your say in how Israel is shaped. But what about the rest of us who don’t want to move to Israel?

I don’t think there is a simple answer to this question. But one solution may come from the famous Zionist and essayist Asher Ginsberg, better known by his pen-name, Ahad Ha’am (1856 - 1927). He was a proponent of cultural and spiritual Zionism who taught that Israel should be the cultural, spiritual center of the Jewish world. Ahad Ha’am did not believe that Israel could exist without a strong foundation on Jewish values and culture. Although Ahad Ha’am was a supporter of aliyah, he also believed that the diaspora can and should exist with Israel as its soul.

I believe we can view Israel in two distinct ways. We can see it as the political entity called the “State of Israel” and we can see it as the Jewish homeland known as the “Land of Israel.” This distinction is purely semantic, as the two can never be separated but it may help us in thinking about the way in which we deal with Israel as a whole.

We can be citizens of the world and challenge the “State of Israel” the same way that we challenge other countries. By no means does Israel, or should Israel, have to listen to what we have to say, but nevertheless, it is our duty to speak out on what we believe. We can also support the “Land of Israel” by visiting, planting trees through JNF and instilling a love of Israel in our children. This is how we, as diaspora Jews, can take ownership of the land.

## Questions

1. Even though Eli does not respond directly to the Alterman poem, can you determine where he stands regarding the tone of “The Silver Platter”?
2. Eli writes, “...I do have some ownership of Israel, don’t I? Israel is my homeland just as much as it is any other Jewish person’s anywhere in the world...” How do you feel about this statement? If you agree with it, do you think its truth places any demands on Eli? Does it place demands on you?
3. If Hanan Cidor and Eli Freedman represent two points on a spectrum of Jewish relationships with Israel, where would you put yourself on that spectrum?