

Yom Ha-atzmaut: Laws & Customs

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The State of Israel was proclaimed on the fifth of Iyyar, 5708, corresponding to May 14, 1948, and this day is celebrated as Israel Independence Day, also popularly known by its Hebrew name, Yom Ha-atzmaut. In Israel, the day is celebrated with parades and great celebration. For Jews everywhere, the fact of Israeli independence is considered not merely in terms of its political implications, but also in terms of its religious significance.

Nevertheless, a specific formal liturgy for its commemoration has not yet been established. Some prayerbooks, including Siddur Sim Shalom, incorporate a new Al Ha-nissim prayer modeled on the versions recited at Hanukkah and on Purim into the Amidah and the Grace after Meals. Some congregations also recite the full version of Hallel. Further, some synagogues call three people to the Torah to read a special passage about God's protection of Israel in the Promised Land, Deuteronomy 7:12–8:18. In such synagogues, the third aliyah is considered the maftir reading and is then followed by a haftarah, Isaiah 10:32–12:6 (the same as for the eighth day of Passover), which deals with God's promises of national redemption. It is also customary to recite the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel that appears in most prayerbooks.

Although Yom Ha-atzmaut falls during s'firah, the celebration of Israel Independence Day is usually, and reasonably, deemed to take precedence over the restrictions on joyous behavior normally associated with the weeks between Passover and Shavuot.

The day before Yom Ha-atzmaut is called Yom Ha-zikkaron, Memorial Day, and is dedicated to the memory of all those who have died in defense of the State of Israel since 1948 and of the Jewish yishuv in pre-state days. As on Yom Ha-shoah, there is no special liturgy for this day. It is appropriate to add special prayers to the service and to recite the El Malei Rahamim memorial prayer in memory of those who have died in defense of Israel. Many congregations recite Kaddish in memory of the fallen. A memorial candle may also be lit at home or in the synagogue, or in both places. In Israel, an air raid siren is sounded early in the morning of Yom Ha-zikkaron, as the entire country pauses to observe a national moment of mourning. Observing a similar moment of silence in sympathy with the citizens of Israel is also an appropriate gesture for Jews in the Diaspora.

When the fifth of Iyyar falls on Friday or Saturday, Yom Ha-atzmaut is observed on the previous Thursday. When it falls on a Monday, it is observed on the following Tuesday. This is done so that the festivities do not fall just before, on, or just after Shabbat. And a Monday Yom Ha-atzmaut would make Yom Ha-zikkaron fall just after Shabbat.

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