

Yom Hazikron and Yom Hatzmaut: Dam Maccabim and the Parade That Didn't March

Hope everyone is keeping well and enjoying the longer nights and the cracks of freedom which are showing in the lockdown.

This week marked the unique and poignant change from Yom Hazikron into Yom Hatzmaut in Israel. For those of us who have been lucky enough to experience this moving occasion you will know just what I am talking about. The sirens sound and streets are completely devoid of traffic even on the major highways such as Ayelon which serves Tel Aviv. The Israelis spend the day in cemeteries across the land remembering their families, comrades and friends who number the 23928 victims who died in Wars and terror which has marked every decade since the rebirth of the Jewish homeland.

The sadness and sorrow of all those memories is replaced at sunset by an eruption of colour, celebration and song when the act of remembering turns into an act of hope celebrating the music and food and culture of Israel.

When I was there I was proud to accompany some friends to visit the small cemetery in the Ramat HaNegev area where hundreds of young people were paying respect to those who had fallen. I was given a small sticker with a flower and the Hebrew statement Yizkor which means remember.



I guess this is a bit like the poppy which we wear on Remembrance Day, but when I asked many of the young people in the Kibbutz, they weren't sure of its origin, so I did some research. The flower is known as "Dam HaMaccabim" and is a beautiful and resilient red flower which grows in the fields of Israel. It is poignantly called the Dam HaMaccabim – the Blood of the Maccabees. Legend has it that everywhere a drop of blood spilled from one of the ancient Judean warriors, another flower came into being. In their deaths they commanded the land of Israel bring forth new life.



This wildflower grows only in Israel usually up on the mountains and hilltops where many of the Maccabee battles took place. It blossoms in April every year during the season which Yom HaZikron falls which makes it the perfect candidate for Israel's official Memorial Flower.



The flower became popular in the stamps and small stickers worn and depicted on monuments and memorials throughout the country, but as a delicate and protected wildflower it was never actually worn on Yom HaZikron but instead replaced by the sticker.

This all changed in 2019 when a group of people founded the Dam Hamaccabim organisation and discovered a way to grow these wildflowers in hothouses and to accelerate their natural blossoming time by three months so that the flowers would be ready for distribution in Israel and in the diaspora in time for Memorial Day.

The process of drying and preserving the flowers takes around seven days. Once they are ready they are formed into a decorative pin. Each flower is then individually packaged and ready to be shipped. The pins are sold as a fundraiser for different organisations and projects that commemorate the fallen. Like the passing from Yom HaZikron to Yom Hatzmaut the flower carries the message of growth from loss and the ability to always chose life. It is a constant reminder that all blossoms and thrives in the land of Israel.



The Parade That Didn't March

On 5th Iyyar 5708 / 14th May 1948 in Tel Aviv David Ben Gurion as the head of the Jewish Agency proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. Israel's Independence Day Law from 1949 set the date for Independence Day as the 5th of the Hebrew month of Iyar, allowing for the holiday to be brought forward or delayed in the event that the 5th falls on Shabbat. Additionally, the law authorizes the Prime Minister to "determine the symbols of Independence Day" and even "to instruct regarding the waving of flags and celebrations". The question of how Israeli Independence Day came to be celebrated in the way that we are familiar with today is a complex one.



In actual fact 5th of Iyar was not exactly the only First Independence Day to be celebrated in Israel but was actually preceded by State Day, which was celebrated on the 20th of Tammuz (July 27th, 1948) – just a few weeks after the actual declaration of Israel's independence. This date was chosen as it was the anniversary of Theodor Herzl's death and those within the fledgling state sought to link Herzl's vision and the new State of Israel which had just been established. The main event on State Day was the first ever military parade conducted by the young IDF.



A soldier carries the national flag during the IDF parade in Tel Aviv on Israel's first Independence Day, 1949. (Photo from the National Library of Israel)

The 5th of Iyar, 5709 fell on May 4th, 1949, however nobody knew how they were supposed to celebrate Independence. Folk dancing in the streets reminded people of the jubilant spontaneous celebrations after the UN Partition Plan vote in late November, 1947 and plans were made for celebrations in towns and cities across the country, including light displays, flag-waving, concerts by municipal orchestras, torchlight parades and various rallies and marches.



On the eve of the holiday, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion held a special Independence Day speech and many of the events included a memorial prayer for fallen soldiers, as Israel did not yet have an official day dedicated to remembering them. Little did anyone realise just how special this transition from Memorial to Independence would become for a country which would spend every decade of its existence fending off terror within and without its small borders. There was little doubt about the planned highlight of the day, the military parade by the Israel Defense Forces. Two parades were planned, in both Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The Jerusalem parade went ahead without major incident, but the big story of Israel's first Independence Day was the controversial Tel Aviv parade. It became known as **"The Parade That Didn't March"**. The name stuck and it is remembered to this day. At first, everything seemed fine. Representatives from the IDF's various corps marched down the city's streets: The navy, the medical corps and veterans of the pre-state Haganah organization all displayed their arms. Jewish and Druze soldiers proudly marched alongside each other. Military jeeps and artillery guns were received with cheers by onlookers while a handful of military aircraft flew overhead – all with the customary marching band!



Druze soldiers on parade. (The National Library of Israel)

By 4 o'clock, the marchers were due to arrive at the main stage erected on Dizengoff Street to salute the Israeli leadership, rumours had already begun to spread that the parade had been cancelled! It was said that people stood and cried as the parade could simply not make its way to the main stage on Dizengoff Street because of mass overcrowding at the corner of Allenby and Ben-Yehuda. When the masses assembled at Dizengoff were told for the third time that the procession would not be coming because it could not clear a path through the 200 metres section from Mugrabi Square to Idelson Street they simply did not believe it. *It could not be true. OUR army? The army that had reached all the way to Eilat, that could easily have entered Damascus, was now incapable of making it to Ben-Yehuda Street?*

The massive crowds that showed up to watch the parade had spilled over onto the streets and blocked the path of the marchers and despite all the efforts by the police to open the roads eventually, the organizers admitted defeat and called off the parade before the crowds slowly dispersed in bitter disappointment.

Perhaps organizational failures led to the debacle or perhaps the authorities were not prepared for the massive interest and sheer quantities that showed up to watch the spectacle. Reports cited crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands – in a country with a population of some 600,000 people. In addition, roads were only blocked off shortly before the event, further contributing to the chaos.



Police try to disperse crowds 1949, Tel Aviv

Following the embarrassment surrounding the Tel Aviv parade, it was decided to hold yet another "State Day" celebration on July 17th, 1949. Another parade was organized on a smaller scale, in order to make amends and finally complete the unfinished march. This was the last time that Israel's independence was celebrated on the day of Herzl's death, and the 5th of Iyar later became the official Yom Hatzmaut of the State of Israel. The practice of marking Israel's Memorial Day or Yom HaZikaron on the day before Independence Day began in 1951 and this poignant transformation continues to this day.

The year of 1951 would become the first year of the traditional Independence Day torch lighting ceremony on Mt. Herzl in Jerusalem. The Israel Prize ceremony was first held on Independence Day, 1953, and the first International Bible Contest was held on the State of Israel's tenth birthday in 1958. Slowly but surely, year after year, Israel's Independence Day has developed into the national celebration we know today. Many spend Independence Day on beaches along the Mediterranean barbecuing and watching the growing flyover of aircraft from the IAF.



Shabbat Shalom from Stephen, Gie, Kacey and Althea, hope we will all be able to meet up soon,

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