

Israel & Us on the SeeSaw
 Yom HaAtzmaut/Parashat Achrei Mot-Kedoshim
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My older brother has a dog, whom I'm sure some of you by now have heard me speak of. I accompany my brother, and his dog Avi, on the weekends on walks to and from a park near where he lives. In this park, there's a playground, and oh boy does Avi LOVE the playground. The second we walk through the gate, Logan releases Avi from her leash and she goes running!! The toys, the colors, the children!! How could this not be the most fun for this little puppy?! Her most favorite thing in the entire park though, is the slide. Avi runs up the stairs, and then flies down that slide, and then, she runs up again, and then slides back down again and again. While Avi plays and roams free, my brother and I usually sit on a bench and catch up. Sometimes we'll partake in the fun and step on some of the various stepping blocks, or walk under the monkey bars, and once we even decided to hang out on the seesaw for a little while.

A SeeSaw or otherwise known as a TeeterTotter, is typically a long, narrow board, supported by a single pivot point, located at the midpoint between both ends. As one end goes up, the other goes down, or so it goes if the weights on either end are uneven. If they are the same though, then the board levels out. It's all about what is resting on either side of the plank.

The same can be said of a balance scale. These scales measure weight of various objects, and are mostly reliable, except for if the calibration is off. If the calibration of the scale is not true, then the measurements of weight will be inaccurate.

Our second of the two Torah portions of the week is concerned with this very concept. "You Shall have an honest balance, honest weights, an honest *Ephah* and an honest *Hin*." States Leviticus chapter 19 verse 36. Much of this Torah portion brings up various laws about how to behave morally in society, and specifically here, it commands people to not falsify various measurements such as the weight of certain goods.

Not only should the balance be honest, the text states in the English translation, but it shall be **קָדָשׁ** says the Hebrew. It shall be "just", "right", or "righteous". The ways in which one conducts themselves even in the simplest task of weighing out wheat or flour, shall be honest. And just.

In the legal system, there are visual symbols that exist to represent the ideals that the system itself strives to attain. The Scales of Justice represent this goal of upholding truth and fairness within the Judicial system. What is shown by using a scale for justice is that truth, and fairness need balance. The Scales of Justice are just like a seesaw. Only balance on either side of the scale will allow for it to stay stable. Within our government specifically, this goal of equilibrium is

achieved through the checks and balances system. When one branch of government oversteps, another branch's duty is to keep them in line. There is give and take. That is the type of system that is set in place for our democracy here in the United States.

The democracy that exists in Israel though, does not have an official checks and balances system. They do not have a constitution. Instead, they have a set of basic laws that can be all-too easily turned their heads by the Israeli government, the Knesset, and by the Supreme Court. For this reason and many others we have seen throughout history, the government in Israel so easily lose its balance.

Through the past few months, even here in our building, we have spoken on this bimah of so many different layers of Israel as we've witnessed it from afar, and more recently, up close when our group traveled there back in February. When reflecting on our trip, I highlighted the protests that have taken over Israel, and have even extended to various locations in the United States. People have been gathering to protest the Israeli government, and more specifically, Prime Minister Netanyahu's proposed judicial reforms, which would lead to total upheaval of the Supreme Court.

As one side of the seesaw moves, so does the other. As government officials in Israel make plans for change, the people take action. They protest, they use their voice, they make noise, in all efforts to simply be seen by their country's leaders. Since the people in power are not providing checks and balances, the people are doing it for them. When the leaders of government are ignoring their duty to keep honesty and justice at the forefront of their work, the people whom they are governing are showing up. And not only are they showing up to the streets of Israel, these rallies have spread far and wide, reaching all the way over to various locations in the US.

Our Shinshin, Roy, who is here tonight with us, attended a protest a few weeks ago at the Israeli consulate in New York City. When Roy arrived at Academy, later that day, he explained to me what he witnessed. He told me how people of all degrees of faith, age, gender, and religion have been gathering together for a common cause. That people on all scales of beliefs, the most Orthodox of Jews and the most secular, are standing side by side in crowds of thousands to express their right to protest. They are embodying democracy, and the need for a government that is just, honest, and balanced. He spoke to me with such a sense of pride and love for his home, and for his people.

Tonight, is our time to outwardly express our own love and pride of Israel with our very own celebration of Yom HaAtzmaut! Israel's Independence Day. It is our celebration and recognition of the state of Israel and its creation and establishment 75 years ago.

As we move into this time period for Israel, leaders of American Zionist movements have a lot to say about where people are mentally, and spiritually. Rabbi Josh Weinberg, the Vice President of the URJ for Israel & Reform Zionism, and Executive Director of ARZA, wrote an article where he did a deep dive of an old principle that was relevant at the time of Israel's establishment. "Reintroducing HaGshama" was the title. This Hebrew word "hagshama", was used often in reference to the state of Israel during the time of its establishment. The term is defined as "practical realization" and was a key term in Zionist thought. Rabbi Weinberg, though, takes this term and adds new meaning to it, reinvigorating the idea to feel more relevant in this time period of Israel.

He says, "Philosophically, *hagshamah* signifies the desire to meld opposites and form consensus while thinking and creating, adapting and adjusting, inventing and innovating." When hagshama was first used within Israel conversations, it was to help inspire a creation of state. Now, at Israel's 75th birthday, the term is all about finding a way to keep Israel alive. Not by letting Israel teeter too far one way or the other in our minds, good or bad, right or wrong, eventually sliding too far downward throughout history. But instead, by both holding up all sides equally, and allowing them to exist together.

With honest weights, and honest balance we too in this room must have our eyes on Israel. In all its complexities and history, its challenges, and its beauty, we must look honestly upon her. If we do not, then the seesaw that is our relationship to Israel might tip over. If we disengage, then we actually jump off our end, and then there is no more balance from our side.

This conversation is alive and reaching all the way to us, and to our community, and it is not going away. What we must not do is be silent, or complacent, too angered and disappointed by the situation to do nothing.

Instead we must remember our love, and pride just as we celebrate it on Yom HaAtzmaut and allow that to move us forward into continuing the relationship and the conversation. How do we celebrate Israel's independence? By making sure that our relationship to Israel still exists.

Us Jews here in the diaspora sit on one end of the seesaw, with Israel on the other. The ebb and flow, the ups and downs are the relationship. And the end goal is balance. To stay equally engaged. Yom HaAtzmaut and all that we celebrate here tonight, independence, democracy, peace, those are what matter in the balance of all that can drag the scale down. These are what need to be in the focus when thinking of why we should care.

It's up to us to use our honest judgment, and see all the sides of what has been, and what will be for Israel. It's on us to care about the world around us, and to defend democracy whether that be

in Israel or here in our own country. We cannot hop off of the seesaw. If we do, then what's left on the other side gets forgotten and stuck in the ground, unmoving, and unbalanced.

It is upon us. Not only me, and not only you, but all of us, together. Aleinu. It is on us. Every time we say this prayer we are reminded of our communal responsibility to stay engaged. This prayer is a call to action, to stay involved in caring for the world.

May we move forward into this 75th anniversary of Israel, with the goal of balance and peace in our hearts. May all of us, remember, that we have the power to keep the seesaw that is our relationship to Israel level, through honesty and truth, so long as we keep ourselves engaged.

Shabbat Shalom, and please rise for the Aleinu.