



We Hereby Declare!

Israel's Declaration of Independence: the Birth of a Jewish and Democratic State

On May 15th, 1948, just a few hours after the last soldier of the British Mandate left the shores of the country, six months after the UN passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish state, 57 years after the first aliyah, the first wave of Zionist Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine, 41 years after the Balfour declaration recognized the right of a Jewish homeland in Israel, only a few short years after the near destruction of European Jewry, and thousands of years in the making, Israel declared its independence as a modern Jewish state in a small and modest building on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. David Ben Gurion, the soon to be Prime Minister of Israel, surrounded by other prominent Zionist leaders gathered in a room while half the city of Tel Aviv awaited outside, and declared Israel a state, all while what would be known as the 1948 War of Independence raged throughout Israel.

The document that Ben Gurion read on that day, Israel's Declaration of Independence, serves to this day as the basis of Israeli law and government. It draws on the long standing connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and addresses the most fundamental questions of Zionist and Jewish values, while balancing them with democratic principles, a challenge that preoccupies Israeli democracy to this day.

In the absence of a written constitution, Israeli society and Israeli law rely on the Declaration of Independence as the source for the basic principles of the state.

What can we learn about Israel from this short but extremely significant document, and how does Israel find the delicate balance today between upholding Jewish values, serving as the homeland of all Jewish people around the world, and maintaining its status as a democracy? In studying the Israeli Declaration of Independence, one can learn about the history of the country, while examining the day to day challenges of attempting to maintain a Jewish and Democratic nation state.

We invite you and your students to study this unique document, in celebration and commemoration of the 66th anniversary of Israel's Declaration of Independence.

Objective: Familiarize students with Israel's fundamental foundation document and discuss the challenge of maintaining the nature of Israel as both Jewish and Democratic, while maintaining its status as the homeland of the Jewish people worldwide.

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Process:

I. Introduction to Declaration of Independence and Historical Context

- Provide students with a short historical background to the events leading to Israel's Declaration of Independence. This can be as basic as the information provided in our introduction, or you can provide your own background based on your students' familiarity with the subject.
- Read through the full text of the Declaration of Independence. (This would be a good time to show any of the youtube links provided as well)

II. Breaking down the themes

- We chose excerpts from the Declaration that highlight three specific themes in the document:
 1. Establishment/statement of the Jewish People's connection to the Land of Israel.
 2. Israel as a Jewish AND Democratic state
 3. A call for peace with Israel's neighbors from the day of Israel's inception!

For each of the following sections, you can use the excerpts and discussion points provided to create a dialogue about the text and what it means for Israel and the Jewish people today.



A. The Jewish Connection to the State of Israel

Relevant passages:

1. Eretz-Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.
2. After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

4. In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.

This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917.

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people - the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe – was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State

On the 29th November, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel

This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.

Accordingly we, members of the people's council, representatives of the Jewish community of Eretz-Israel and of the Zionist movement, are here assembled on the day of the termination of the British mandate over Eretz-Israel and, by virtue of our natural and historic right and on the strength of the resolution of the United Nations general assembly, hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.

Discussion questions/topics:

- When did the connection of the Jewish People and the Land of Israel begin?
- Do we consider the Bible a clear *historic* resource, a *cultural/mythological* resource or a combination of the two? Does either choice make our people's relationship with the Jewish homeland more or less valid?
- What does being Jewish mean? Is it a religion? A Nation? A Culture? What is "a people"?
- What are the main reasons for the founding of the State of Israel: The Bible, Jewish (proven) history, anti-Semitism, Zionism, the Hebrew language (and its revival), the Holocaust, the UN resolution (11/29/1947), victory in wars, the Declaration of Independence?

B. Israel as a Jewish and Democratic State

**Before delving into this issue, it may be a good idea to briefly go over what it means to be a “nation state,” what does it mean when we say that Israel is the “nation state of the Jewish people”.*

- Miriam Webster definition: *a form of political organization in which a group of people who share the same history, traditions, or language live in a particular area under one government.*
- Discussion question: Based on this definition, do you believe Israel is a nation state?
- Are there other nation states besides Israel?
 - Yes, the majority of European countries are considered nation states, i.e. **France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania, the Ukraine...**
- Beyond defining itself as the Jewish nation state, Israel is also a **Democracy**. The definition of democracy is: *a form of government in which all eligible citizens participate equally—either directly or indirectly through elected representatives—in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. It encompasses social, religious, cultural, ethnic and racial equality, justice, liberty and fraternity.*
- Lead in questions based on the principles of nation state and democracy: If Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, what does that mean for its minority populations? Within the Jewish State, does the minority population receive equal and free democratic rights?
- Looking back at the Declaration of Independence, where do we find reference to the above questions? Is anything missing? Did our founding fathers not think of any significant issues that eventually surfaced?
- In order to address these questions, use the following relevant excerpt from the Declaration of Independence:

The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Possible discussion points and questions:

- What does it say about Israel that this section is included in its Declaration of Independence?
- Is there a contradiction in being both a Jewish and Democratic country?
- If so, where do you think these two characteristics might conflict?
 - This is a good opportunity to bring up current issues in Israeli society (depending on where the discussion goes), such as national holidays, Israeli citizenship, who is required to serve in the army, marriage laws in Israel, etc.
 - For example: discuss the relationship between the ruling majority and minorities in a democratic society and the heavy responsibility that the stronger party has over the weaker on. Israel’s national anthem “Hatikvah” can be used as an example for

this point. If Israel is truly a democracy, should a more neutral national anthem be chosen? (See Hatikvah lyrics on PowerPoint)

- Additional example: What should Shabbat look like in a Jewish state? In a democracy?

C. A Call for Peace

In declaring itself a nation state, Israel also called for peace with its neighbors, neighbors who at the time were fighting a war against them. As mentioned before, the Declaration has served as the guidelines for Israeli society and government, and the following passage is found in this framework document.

Relevant passages:

We appeal – in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months - to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the up building of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

We extend our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good Neighborliness.

Possible discussion points and questions:

- Was anything NOT said in regard to Israel's true aspiration for peace in the Declaration?
- Imagine the following scenario: the Palestinians also declare statehood on that same day (of the British Mandate's end)...
- What if the Arab nations had accepted the UN resolution of a two-state solution on November 29th 1947 (כ"ט בנובמבר)...
- Had the above occurred, the State of Israel would have been significantly smaller. Would Israel have fought the Arabs (Palestinians and several other Arab nations) to try and conquer additional land? Should it have?



בארץ-ישראל קם העם היהודי, בה עוצבה דמותו הרוחנית, הדתית והמדינית, בה חי חיי קוממיות ממלכתית, בה יצר נכסי תרבות לאומיים וכלל-אנושיים והוריש לעולם כולו את ספר הספרים הנצחי.

לאחר שהוגלה העם מארצו בכוח הזרוע שמר לה אמונים בכל ארצות פזוריו, ולא חדל מתפילה ומתקוה לשוב לארצו ולחדש בתוכה את חירותו המדינית.

מתוך קשר היסטורי ומסורתי זה חתרו היהודים בכל דור לשוב ולהאחז במולדתם העתיקה; ובדורות האחרונים שבו לארצם בהמונים, וחלוצים, מעפילים ומגינים הפריחו נשמות, החיו שפתם העברית, בנו כפרים וערים, והקימו ישוב גדל והולך השליט על משקו ותרבותו, שוחר שלום ומגן על עצמו, מביא ברכת הקידמה לכל תושבי הארץ ונושא נפשו לעצמאות ממלכתית.

בשנת תרנ"ז (1897) נתכנס הקונגרס הציוני לקול קריאתו של הוגה חזון המדינה היהודית תיאודור הרצל והכריז על זכות העם היהודי לתקומה לאומית בארצו.

זכות זו הוכרה בהצהרת בלפור מיום ב' בנובמבר 1917 ואושרה במנדט מטעם חבר הלאומים, אשר נתן במיוחד תוקף בין-לאומי לקשר ההיסטורי שבין העם היהודי לבין ארץ-ישראל ולזכות העם היהודי להקים מחדש את ביתו הלאומי.

השואה שנתחוללה על עם ישראל בזמן האחרון, בה הוכרעו לטבח מיליונים יהודים באירופה, הוכיחה מחדש בעליל את ההכרח בפתרון בעית העם היהודי מחוסר המולדת והעצמאות על-ידי חידוש המדינה היהודית בארץ-ישראל, אשר תפתח לרווחה את שערי המולדת לכל יהודי ותעניק לעם היהודי מעמד של אומה שוות-זכויות בתוך משפחת העמים.

שארית הפליטה שניצלה מהטבח הנאצי האיום באירופה ויהודי ארצות אחרות לא חדלו להעפיל לארץ-ישראל, על אף כל קושי, מניעה וסכנה, ולא פסקו לתבוע את זכותם לחיי כבוד, חירות ועמל-ישרים במולדת עמם.

במלחמת העולם השניה תרם הישוב העברי בארץ את מלוא-חלקו למאבק האומות השוחרות חירות ושלום נגד כוחות הרשע הנאצי, ובדם חייליו ובמאמצו המלחמתי קנה לו את הזכות להמנות עם העמים מייסדי ברית האומות המאוחדות.

ב-29 בנובמבר 1947 קיבלה עצרת האומות המאוחדות החלטה המחייבת הקמת מדינה יהודית בארץ-ישראל; העצרת תבעה מאת תושבי ארץ-ישראל לאחוז בעצמם בכל הצעדים הנדרשים מצדם הם לביצוע ההחלטה. הכרה זו של האומות המאוחדות בזכות העם היהודי להקים את מדינתו אינה ניתנת להפקעה.

זוהי זכותו הטבעית של העם היהודי להיות ככל עם ועם עומד ברשות עצמו במדינתו הריבונית.

לפיכך נתכנסו, אנו חברי מועצת העם, נציגי הישוב העברי והתנועה הציונית, ביום סיום המנדט הבריטי על ארץ-ישראל, ובתוקף זכותנו הטבעית וההיסטורית ועל יסוד החלטת עצרת האומות

המאוחדות אנו מכריזים בזאת על הקמת מדינה יהודית בארץ ישראל, היא מדינת ישראל.

אנו קובעים שהחל מרגע סיום המנדט, הלילה, אור ליום שבת ו' אייר תש"ח, 15 במאי 1948, ועד להקמת השלטונות הנבחרים והסדירים של המדינה בהתאם לחוקה שתיקבע על-ידי האספה המכוננת הנבחרת לא יאוחר מ-1 באוקטובר 1948 - תפעל מועצת העם כמועצת מדינה זמנית, ומוסד הביצוע שלה, מנהלת-העם, יהווה את הממשלה הזמנית של המדינה היהודית, אשר תיקרא בשם ישראל.

מדינת ישראל תהא פתוחה לעליה יהודית ולקיבוץ גלויות; תשקוד על פיתוח הארץ לטובת כל תושביה; תהא מושתתה על יסודות החירות, הצדק והשלום לאור חזונו של נביאי ישראל; תקיים שיוון זכויות חברתי ומדיני גמור לכל אזרחיה בלי הבדל דת, גזע ומין; תבטיח חופש דת, מצפון, לשון, חינוך ותרבות; תשמור על המקומות הקדושים של כל הדתות; ותהיה נאמנה לעקרונותיה של מגילת האומות המאוחדות. מדינת ישראל תהא מוכנה לשתף פעולה עם המוסדות והנציגים של האומות המאוחדות בהגשמת החלטת העצרת מיום 29 בנובמבר 1947 ותפעל להקמת האחדות הכלכלית של ארץ-ישראל בשלמותה.

אנו קוראים לאומות המאוחדות לתת יד לעם היהודי בבנין מדינתו ולקבל את מדינת ישראל לתוך משפחת העמים.

אנו קוראים - גם בתוך התקפת-הדמים הנערכת עלינו זה חדשים - לבני העם הערבי תושבי מדינת ישראל לשמור על שלום וליטול חלקם בבנין המדינה על יסוד אזרחות מלאה ושווה ועל יסוד נציגות מתאימה בכל מוסדותיה, הזמניים והקבועים.

אנו מושיטים יד שלום ושכנות טובה לכל המדינות השכנות ועמיהן, וקוראים להם לשיתוף פעולה ועזרה הדדית עם העם העברי העצמאי בארצו. מדינת ישראל מוכנה לתרום חלקה במאמץ משותף לקידמת המזרח התיכון כולו.

אנו קוראים אל העם היהודי בכל התפוצות להתלכד סביב הישוב בעליה ובבנין ולעמוד לימינו במערכה הגדולה על הגשמת שאיפת הדורות לגאולת ישראל.

מתוך ביטחון בצור ישראל הננו חותמים בחתימת ידינו לעדות על הכרזה זו, במושב מועצת המדינה הזמנית, על אדמת המולדת, בעיר תל-אביב, היום הזה, ערב שבת, ה' אייר תש"ח, 14 במאי 1948.

דוד בן-גוריון, דניאל אוסטר, מרדכי בנטוב, יצחק בן-צבי, אליהו ברלין, פריץ ברנשטיין, הרב וולף גולד, מאיר גרבוזסקי, יצחק גרינבוים, ד"ר אברהם גרנובסקי, אליהו דובקין, מאיר וילנר-קובנר, זרח ורהפטיג, הרצל ורדי, רחל כהן, הרב קלמן כהנא, סעדיה כובאשי, הרב יצחק מאיר לוין, מאיר דוד לוינשטיין, צבי לוריא, גולדה מאירסון, נחום ניר, צבי סגל, הרב יהודה ליב הכהן פישמן, דוד צבי פנקס, אהרן ציזלינג, משה קולודני, אליעזר קפלן, אברהם קצנלסון, פליכס רוזנבליט, דוד רמז, ברל רפטור, מרדכי שטנר, בן-ציון שטרנברג, בכור שיטרית, משה שפירא, משה שרתוק.

ERETZ-ISRAEL was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.

After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people remained faithful to it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Impelled by this historic and traditional attachment, Jews strove in every successive generation to re-establish themselves in their ancient homeland. In recent decades they returned in their masses. Pioneers, ma'pilim [immigrants coming to Eretz-Israel in defiance of restrictive legislation] and defenders, they made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood.

In the year 5657 (1897), at the summons of the spiritual father of the Jewish State, Theodore Herzl, the First Zionist Congress convened and proclaimed the right of the Jewish people to national rebirth in its own country.

This right was recognized in the Balfour Declaration of the 2nd November, 1917, and re-affirmed in the Mandate of the League of Nations which, in particular, gave international sanction to the historic connection between the Jewish people and Eretz-Israel and to the right of the Jewish people to rebuild its National Home.

The catastrophe which recently befell the Jewish people – the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe – was another clear demonstration of the urgency of solving the problem of its homelessness by re-establishing in Eretz-Israel the Jewish State, which would open the gates of the homeland wide to every Jew and confer upon the Jewish people the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations.

Survivors of the Nazi holocaust in Europe, as well as Jews from other parts of the world, continued to migrate to Eretz-Israel, undaunted by difficulties, restrictions and dangers, and never ceased to assert their right to a life of dignity, freedom and honest toil in their national homeland.

In the Second World War, the Jewish community of this country contributed its full share to the struggle of the freedom- and peace-loving nations against the forces of Nazi

wickedness and, by the blood of its soldiers and its war effort, gained the right to be reckoned among the peoples who founded the United Nations.

On the 29th November, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz-Israel; the General Assembly required the inhabitants of Eretz-Israel to take such steps as were necessary on their part for the implementation of that resolution. This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their State is irrevocable.

This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign State.

ACCORDINGLY WE, MEMBERS OF THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ERETZ-ISRAEL AND OF THE ZIONIST MOVEMENT, ARE HERE ASSEMBLED ON THE DAY OF THE TERMINATION OF THE BRITISH MANDATE OVER ERETZ-ISRAEL AND, BY VIRTUE OF OUR NATURAL AND HISTORIC RIGHT AND ON THE STRENGTH OF THE RESOLUTION OF THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, HEREBY DECLARE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A JEWISH STATE IN ERETZ-ISRAEL, TO BE KNOWN AS THE STATE OF ISRAEL.

WE DECLARE that, with effect from the moment of the termination of the Mandate being tonight, the eve of Sabbath, the 6th Iyar, 5708 (15th May, 1948), until the establishment of the elected, regular authorities of the State in accordance with the Constitution which shall be adopted by the Elected Constituent Assembly not later than the 1st October 1948, the People's Council shall act as a Provisional Council of State, and its executive organ, the People's Administration, shall be the Provisional Government of the Jewish State, to be called "Israel".

THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

THE STATE OF ISRAEL is prepared to cooperate with the agencies and representatives of the United Nations in implementing the resolution of the General Assembly of the 29th November, 1947, and will take steps to bring about the economic

union of the whole of Eretz-Israel.

WE APPEAL to the United Nations to assist the Jewish people in the building-up of its State and to receive the State of Israel into the comity of nations.

WE APPEAL – in the very midst of the onslaught launched against us now for months – to the Arab inhabitants of the State of Israel to preserve peace and participate in the upbuilding of the State on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions.

WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land. The State of Israel is prepared to do its share in a common effort for the advancement of the entire Middle East.

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel.

PLACING OUR TRUST IN THE ALMIGHTY, WE AFFIX OUR SIGNATURES TO THIS PROCLAMATION AT THIS SESSION OF THE PROVISIONAL COUNCIL OF STATE, ON THE SOIL OF THE HOMELAND, IN THE CITY OF TEL-AVIV, ON THIS SABBATH EVE, THE 5TH DAY OF IYAR, 5708 (14TH MAY, 1948).

David Ben-Gurion, Daniel Auster, Mordekhai Bentov, Yitzchak Ben Zvi, Eliyahu Berligne, Fritz Bernstein, Rabbi Wolf Gold, Meir Grabovsky, Yitzchak Gruenbaum, Dr. Abraham Granovsky, Eliyahu Dobkin, Meir Wilner-Kovner, Zerach Wahrhaftig, Herzl Vardi Rachel Cohen, Rabbi Kalman Kahana, Saadia Kobashi, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Levin, Meir David Loewenstein, Zvi Luria, Golda Myerson, Nachum Nir, Zvi Segal, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Hacoheh Fishman, David Zvi Pinkas, Aharon Zisling, Moshe Kolodny, Eliezer Kaplan, Abraham Katznelson, Felix Rosenblueth, David Remez, Berl Repetur, Mordekhai Shattner, Ben Zion Sternberg, Bekhor Shitreet, Moshe Shapira, Moshe Shertok

Hatikva

As long as in the heart, within,
A Jewish soul still yearns,
And onward, towards the ends of the east,
An eye still gazes toward Zion;

Our hope is not yet lost,
The hope of two thousand years,
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.

Hatikva Transliteration

*Kol 'od balleivav penimah
Nefesh yehudi homiyah,
Ul(e)fa'atei mizrach kadimah,
'Ayin letziyon tzofiyah;*

*'Od lo avdah tikvateinu,
Hatikvah bat shnot alpayim,
Lihyot 'am chofshi be'artzeinu,
Eretz-tziyon (v)'Y(e)rushalayim.*

התקווה

כֹּל עוֹד בְּלִבְבּ פְּנִימָה
נֶפֶשׁ יְהוּדֵי הוֹמִיָּה,
וּלְפָאֵתֵי מִזְרָח, קְדִימָה,
עֵין לְצִיּוֹן צוֹפִיָּה;

עוֹד לֹא אָבְדָה תִּקְוַתֵּנוּ,
הַתִּקְוָה בֵּת שְׁנוֹת אֲלָפִים,
לְהִיּוֹת עַם חֹפְשֵׁי בְּאַרְצֵנוּ,
אֶרֶץ צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.