Happy are You, O Israel: Thoughts on Yom Ha-Atsma'ut

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Between 2005 and 2009, researchers at the Gallup World Poll surveyed thousands of respondents in 155 countries to find out the "happiness" levels in each country. They asked people to reflect on their overall satisfaction with their lives. Do they feel free? Are they making a living? Do they feel intellectually engaged? Are they relatively free of pain? Do they feel that they are respected by others?

The top five countries on the happiness scale, based on the percentage of citizens who say they are thriving, are Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands. These are prosperous countries, not involved in wars, out of the center of the world's problems.Costa Rica and New Zealand come next.

In eighth place, there is a tie among four countries: Canada, Australia, Switzerland--and ISRAEL.

Yes, Israel. This tiny country--surrounded by enemies, threatened constantly by terrorism and war, subject to an Arab economic boycott, frequently maligned by the media, torn within by ethnic and religious strife--is among the world's happiest countries!

To gain perspective, the United States is ranked 14; France is 44; Saudi Arabia is 58; Russia is 73; Japan is 81; China is 125.

62% of Israeli respondents described themselves as thriving; 35% as struggling; and 3% as suffering. With these figures, Israel is tied for eighth place among the 155 nations surveyed.

Given its many problems, why is Israel so happy? Why is it among the happiest, most thriving, most creative countries of the world?

I believe the answer is: the grand human spirit of the people of Israel. Israelis--in spite of many differences among themselves--recognize that they are part of an incredible, dynamic adventure. Israel is the only example in the history of

humanity of an ancient nation exiled from its land, forced to live (often under horrific conditions) as a minority group scattered throughout the world--who after nearly 2000 years returned to its ancestral land, revived its ancient language, and re-established its historic culture. Israelis--and all members of the Jewish people--understand that we are living in a unique period of history. Israelis are happy not only because they are thriving intellectually, culturally, scientifically, militarily; but because they understand that their lives mean something, that they are pioneers in restoring the honor and strength of the Jewish people after centuries of powerlessness and disgrace.

Happiness doesn't mean having no troubles and no problems. Happiness means believing that life has meaning and direction, that one's life counts, that one is building for the future.

The Jewish people, throughout the ages, has demonstrated an astounding optimism, an unflinching faith in the future. In spite of all the difficulties we have faced, we have never given up on our mission to be a light unto the nations.

The Talmud (Berakhot 4b) quotes the opinion of Rabbi Yohanan who taught: who has a place in the world to come? One who recites the "geulah" (prayer for redemption) connected to the Amidah prayer of the evening service. I think this passage can be understood as follows: Who is the one who will have ultimate redemption? It is one who can dream of redemption even at "night", even at times when everything seems dark and bleak. This is the eternal genius of the Jewish people--to dream of and work for redemption--regardless of how difficult the external circumstances appear.

As we prepare to celebrate Yom Ha'Atsma'ut--Israel Independence Day--let us take tremendous pride in how much Israel has accomplished since its establishment in 1948. Let us rejoice that Israel is one of the happiest, most creative, most advanced countries of the world. Let us pray for true peace and redemption--happiness for all Israel and for all humanity.

Happy Yom Ha'Atsma'ut.

Angel for Shabbat