

# INDEPENDENCE

A RESOURCE FOR YOM HAATZMA'UT

Reflection upon learning  
with a partner

בְּרִזָּל בְּבְרִזָּל יִחַד  
וְאִישׁ יִחַד פְּנִי-רֵעֵהוּ  
משלי כז:17

As iron sharpens iron,  
so too one person sharpens  
the wits of their friend

Proverbs 27:17

## An invitation to reflect

On Friday 14 May 1948, David Ben-Gurion's voice was broadcast across the airwaves as he stood up in Tel Aviv and declared the independence of the State of Israel. It was a remarkable moment, a triumphant victory for the Zionist movement and simultaneously the closing of one chapter and the opening of another in Jewish history. For the first time in almost two millennia, a Jewish state was sovereign in the Land of Israel.

The document that David Ben-Gurion read out on that momentous day, *Megillat HaAtzma'ut* (The Declaration of Independence), is rightly famous and parts of it are quite well-known within the Jewish world. It combines a reading of Jewish history, some hard-nosed political reality and an aspirational explication of Jewish and Zionist values.

As we mark Israel's 70th anniversary, therefore, it is the perfect text to begin a learning conversation to help us celebrate and contemplate the Jewish state. The Limmud Chavruta Project presents you with a wide selection of sources to reflect on Israel past, present and future through the lens of *Megillat HaAtzma'ut*, in conversation both with other texts, ancient and modern, and with your learning partner (*chavruta*) or in a group. We hope the texts provide you with a springboard for a rich and nuanced conversation.

*Chag Atzma'ut Sameach!*

[chavruta@limmud.org](mailto:chavruta@limmud.org)

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

**THE LAND OF 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.*

## REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

*"Birthplace of the Jewish people"*

**בראשית יג:10**

14 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָם, אַחֲרֵי הַפָּרֶד-לוֹט מֵעֵמוֹ, שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה, מִן-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה שָׂם צַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה, וּמִקְדָּמָה וְיָמָּה. 15 כִּי אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה רֹאֶה, לֵךְ אֶתְנַנְּהָ, וּלְיִרְעָה, עַד-עוֹלָם.

**Genesis 13:14-15**

<sup>14</sup>And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, "Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west;

<sup>15</sup>for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever.

Translation: NJPS

**Point to consider:** Is the Land of Israel sacred because it is the land that gave the world the Bible or because it is the land that was promised to Abraham?

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

*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.*

*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.*

## REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

### “The people kept faith”

לְבִי בְּמִזְרָח וְאַנְכִי בְּסוֹף מַעֲרָב.

My heart is in the East even as I dwell in the depths of the West.

Yehuda HaLevi (c. 1075–1141)

### תהילים קלז:א-ז

<sup>1</sup>עַל נְהַרֹת בָּבֶל שָׁם יִשְׁבְּנוּ גַם־כִּינֹו בְּזַכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן: <sup>2</sup>עַל־עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ כְּנִרֹתֵינוּ: <sup>3</sup>כִּי שָׁם שְׁאַלְנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְבַר־יְשִׁיר וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׁמִחָה שִׁירוֹ לָנוּ מִשִׁיר צִיּוֹן: <sup>4</sup>אֵיךְ נִשְׁיֵר אֶת־שִׁירֵהָ עַל אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר: <sup>5</sup>אֲס־אֶשְׁכַּחַד יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי: <sup>6</sup>תִּדְבַק־לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכִּי אֲס־לֹא זֹכְרָכִי אֲס־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׁמִחָתִי: <sup>7</sup>זָכֵר ה' לְבָנֵי אֲדוֹם אֵת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם הָאֲמָרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הַיְסוּד בָּהּ:

### Psalm 137:1-7

<sup>1</sup>By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion. <sup>2</sup>There on the poplars we hung up our lyres, <sup>3</sup>for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” <sup>4</sup>How can we sing a song of the Lord on alien soil? <sup>5</sup>If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; <sup>6</sup>let my tongue stick to my palate if I cease to think of you, if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory even at my happiest hour. <sup>7</sup>Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall; how they cried, “Strip her, strip her to her very foundations!”

Translation: NJPS

**Point to consider:** What is the relationship between the memory of land and the right to land?

### “They returned in their masses”

אָנוּ בָּאוּ אֶרְצָה לְבְנוֹת וּלְהַבְנוֹת בָּהּ.

We have come to the Land to build and to be built.

Menashe Ravina (1899–1968)

### National spirit and national unity

What we lack first of all, even before the “national decision,” is a fixed place for a spiritual national center, which will be a “safe haven” not for Jews, but for Judaism, for the spirit of faith; In which all of our people will participate from all the countries of their dispersion, and this participation will bring the spirit of the spirit closer to each other in place and opinion, and then by the influence of the center on all points of scope, the national spirit will be renewed in all hearts and the national unity...

Ahad Ha'am (1856–1927), *Letter to Dr Pinsker* (1891)

**Point to consider:** On what basis do the Jewish people have a right to the land of Israel?

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

*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.*

## REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

### “This right was recognized”

The Zionist Organization took the necessary political steps to achieve recognition by the nations of the world of the Jewish right to a home in the Land of Israel. But we never wanted the Land of Israel for the Zionists. We wanted it for the Jews. The living, evolving Judaism of the Land of Israel is not a party affair. The Balfour Declaration addresses Judaism as a whole. It was therefore only reasonable that we turn to the Jewish communities around the world, in order to place the work that a limited circle of Jews could never fully carry out on a larger basis and to systematically enlist the forces of Judaism as a whole.

Chaim Weizmann (1874–1952), Speech to the Jewish Agency (1929)

**Point to consider:** How important is international sanction/recognition seventy years after the declaration of independence?

### “A life of dignity, freedom and honest toil”

#### שמות יג:יט

וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־עֲצָמוֹת יוֹסֵף, עִמּוֹ: כִּי הִשְׁבַּע הַשָּׁבִיעַ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֵאמֹר, פֶּקֶד יִפְקֹד אֱלֹקִים אֶתְכֶם, וְהֶעֱלִיתֶם אֶת־עֲצָמוֹתַי מִזֶּה אֶתְכֶם:

#### Exodus 13:19

And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, “God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”

Translation: NJPS

**Point to consider:** The Hebrew words for ‘bones’ and ‘independence’ share the root .נ.צ.ע. In what ways might these words be connected?

### “Reckoned among the peoples”

#### Justice for all

We have come [to the Land of Israel] not to be arrogant towards others, but to liberate ourselves from the power of others over us, and never have we allowed ourselves the ‘privilege’ of behaving towards others as others behave towards us... Zionism would not have been established, and would not stand, in a world that denies justice, law, and freedom for all created in the image [of God]. She will not deny these human values, because in doing so she would pronounce a sentence of judgement upon herself.

Berl Katznelson (1887–1944), In Favour of Embarrassment and Opposition to Offence (1910)

**Point to consider:** Is Zionism primarily a humanist or particularist movement?

**THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**

*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 the Land of Israel and of the Zionist movement, are here assembled on the day of the termination of the British Mandate over Palestine 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 the Land of 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".*

**REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES**

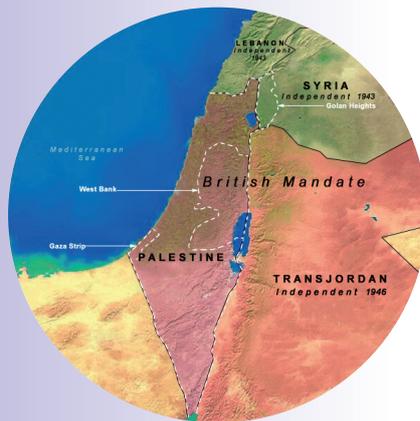
*"A Jewish state in the Land of Israel"*



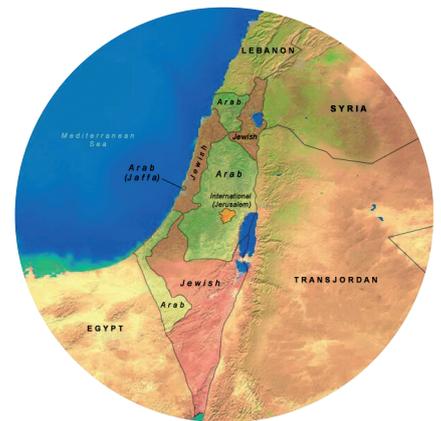
Kingdom of Israel  
1020-923 BCE



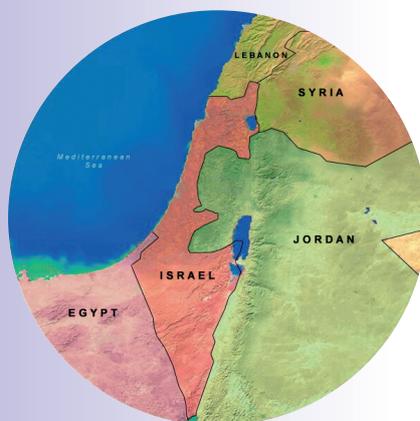
Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah  
923-732 BCE



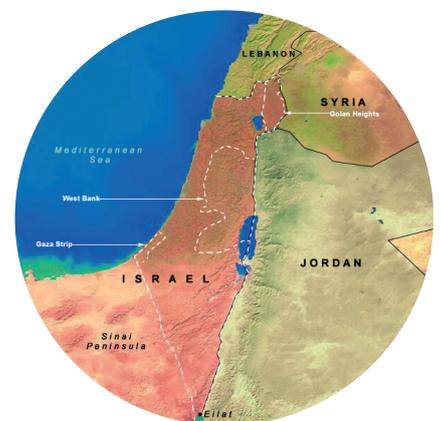
British Mandate  
1921-1947



UN Partition Plan  
1947



The New State of Israel  
1949



Six Day War  
1967

[israelipalestinian.procon.org/](http://israelipalestinian.procon.org/)

**Point to consider:** Does it matter that the State of Israel does not have the borders of the Land of Israel?

## 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.*

*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.*

## REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

### “Complete equality”

#### Equal rights as halakha

I do not know of a public promise more public than the Declaration of Independence, signed by all the leaders of the state, in which the equal rights of all minorities were explicitly guaranteed. This official promise therefore has a binding halakhic weight based on the sanctification of God’s name and the desecration of God’s name. Therefore, breaking the promise is a grave sin...

Yehuda Amital (1924–2010), *The Torah's Attitude Towards Minorities Within the State of Israel* (1990)

**Point to consider:** Do the promises made in the declaration of independence obligate the generation born after 1948? Why or why not?

### “The 29th November”

#### Jerusalem street sign



Photograph: Real Jerusalem Streets

**Point to consider:** The 29th November 1947 features prominently in the Declaration of Independence. How, if at all, should we commemorate this date?

### “In the very midst of the onslaught”

#### Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and Wars 5:1

A king should not wage other wars before a *milchemet mitzvah*. What is considered as *milchemet mitzvah*? The war against the seven nations who occupied Eretz Yisrael, the war against Amalek, and a war fought to assist Israel from an enemy which attacks them. Afterwards, he may wage a *milchemet hareshut*, i.e. a war fought with other nations in order to expand the borders of Israel or magnify its greatness and reputation.

Translation: Eliyahu Touger

**Point to consider:** During the War of Independence in 1948, was Israel’s expansion beyond the borders set out in the UN Partition Plan justifiable?

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

*WE EXTEND our hand to all neighbouring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighbourliness, 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.*

## REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

### “Bonds of cooperation”

Jordan’s negotiators laid out a “vision of peace” in talks Tuesday with Israeli officials and said that Jordan would extend full diplomatic recognition of Israel as one element of an overall peace agreement between the two countries.

But Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued a public and caustic war of words over issues ranging from continued construction of Israeli housing in the occupied territories and terrorist attacks on Israeli citizens.

New York Times, 15 January 1992

### Israel, the nation of peace

Israel, the nation of peace, does not want and shall never want to be built up by the sacrifices of others. Not by warfare and not by force shall we return to our land, from which we were exiled by the deathly force of the sword, but by the spirit of God, who makes peace in the high places, we shall return to the city of peace, from which shall burst rays of light for the peace of the whole world. All nations will hear our blessing of peace and will offer us a hand of true peace, in order that you shall bless the blessing of peace.

Ben-Zion Meir Chai Uziel (1880–1953), *Sefer Machmani Uziel* (1939)

**Point to consider:** Is recognition a necessary condition for peace? Is peace a necessary condition for recognition?

### “The great struggle”

The time has come to recognise that the legitimate place of the Jewish people, of Jewish culture and Jewish religion, is not limited to a single geographical location. Now we can admit that the original Zionist dream which saw Israel as the home of all Jews, was unrealistic.

Gerson D. Cohen (1924–1991), *The Meaning of Israel in the Perspective of History* (1973)

### Speech to American Jewish Congress (2006)

If ... in 100 years Israel will exist and ... I will come to the Diaspora [and] there will not be [any] Jews ... I will not cry...

A. B. Yehoshua

### Remarks at the launch of the “Joint Initiative of the Government of Israel and World Jewry” (2014)

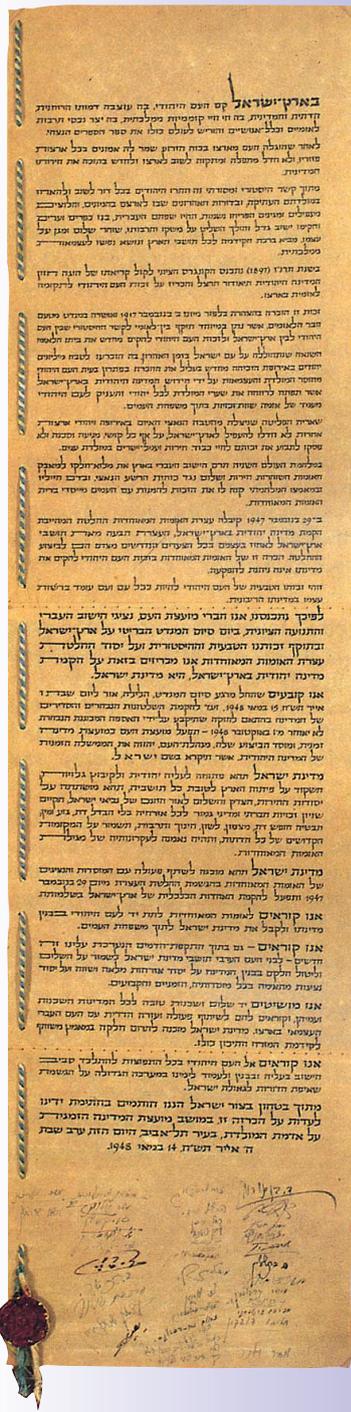
We still have an objective of aliyah, but it’s definitely a watershed point in the sense that we understand that a big proportion of Jews is hoping to stay in the Diaspora. We recognise that now we have to shift the objective to keep them Jewish. It’s a big change. Israel has never stepped up to that.

Naftali Bennett

**Point to consider:** Was the original Zionist dream unrealistic? What should be the role of Israel in Diaspora life today?

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Placing our trust in the Rock of Israel, 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 (14 May 1948).



Photograph: kneset.gov.il

REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

“The Rock of Israel”

שעיהו ל:כט

הַשִּׁיר יִהְיֶה לְכֶם, בְּלַיִל הַתְּקֵד־שִׁחַג; וְשִׁמַּחַת יִלָּבֵב, בְּהוֹלֵךְ בְּהַלֵּיל, לְבוֹא בְּהַר־הָ, אֶל־צוּר יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Isaiah 30:29

For you, there shall be singing as on a night when a festival is hallowed; there shall be rejoicing as when they march with flute, with timbrels, and with lyres to the Rock of Israel on the Mount of the Lord.

Translation: NJPS

Official Prayer for the State of Israel

Heavenly Father, Israel’s Rock and Redeemer, bless the State of Israel, the first flowering of our redemption. Shield it under the wings of Your loving-kindness and spread over it the Tabernacle of Your peace. Send your light and truth to its leaders, ministers and counselors, and direct them with good counsel before You.

Strengthen the hands of the defenders of our Holy Land; grant them deliverance, our God, and crown them with the crown of victory. Grant peace in the land and everlasting joy to its inhabitants.

As for our brothers, the whole house of Israel, remember them in all the lands of our (Israel: their) dispersion, and swiftly lead us (Israel: them) upright to Zion Your city, and Jerusalem Your dwelling place, as is written in the Torah of Moses Your servant: “Even if you are scattered to the furthestmost lands under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and take you back. The Lord your God will bring you to the land your ancestors possessed and you will possess it; and He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. Then the Lord your God will open up your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:4–6).

Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog (1888–1959). Translation: Koren (2009)

The compromise

The declaration was written in a non-religious spirit, and although the words “envisaged by the prophets of Israel” appear, it contains no religious concepts. The Mizrahi representatives protested this absence, and in the spirit of those great days a compromise was found whereby the document concluded with the words “Placing our trust in the Rock of Israel”, a nebulous phrase that may be interpreted either as a reference to the Almighty or as a literary expression referring to the Jewish people.

Anita Shapira, Israel: A History (2012)

Point to consider: What is the relationship between God and the State of Israel?

## THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

*David Ben-Gurion*

<i>Golda Myerson</i>	<i>Daniel Auster</i>
<i>Nachum Nir</i>	<i>Mordekhai Bentov</i>
<i>Zvi Segal</i>	<i>Yitzhak Ben Zvi</i>
<i>Rabbi Yebuda Leib</i>	<i>Eliyahu Berligne</i>
<i>Hacoben Fishman</i>	<i>Fritz Bernstein</i>
<i>David Zvi Pinkas</i>	<i>Rabbi Wolf Gold</i>
<i>Abaron Zisling</i>	<i>Meir Grabovsky</i>
<i>Moshe Kolodny</i>	<i>Yitzhak Gruenbaum</i>
<i>Eliezer Kaplan</i>	<i>Dr. Abraham Granovsky</i>
<i>Abraham Katznelson</i>	<i>Eliyahu Dobkin</i>
<i>Felix Rosenblueth</i>	<i>Meir Wilner-Kovner</i>
<i>David Remez</i>	<i>Zerach Wahrhaftig</i>
<i>Berl Repetur</i>	<i>Herzl Vardi</i>
<i>Mordekhai Shattner</i>	<i>Rachel Cohen</i>
<i>Ben Zion Sternberg</i>	<i>Rabbi Kalman Kabana</i>
<i>Bekhor Shitreet</i>	<i>Saadia Kobashi</i>
<i>Moshe Shapira</i>	<i>Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Levin</i>
<i>Moshe Sbertok</i>	<i>Meir David Loewenstein</i>
	<i>Zvi Luria</i>

Translation: MFA Israel

## REFLECTIONS AND OTHER VOICES

### Descendants reenact Declaration of Independence signing

Decades before they were born, their grandparents and great-grandparents made history by when they signed Israel's Declaration of Independence; descendants of 37 signatories reenact ceremony at the Knesset; 'It's very exciting,' says Moshe Sharett's 15-year-old grandson. 'I also want to be a politician when I grow up.'

"We hereby declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz Israel, to be known as the State of Israel." The words comprise but one line in the Israeli Declaration of Independence, but have become a symbol of that momentous occasion, which took place Friday, May 14, 1948. Now, almost 70 years later, some 60 descendants of 37 of the original declaration's signatories gathered in the Knesset Sunday to recreate the historic moment.

Sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren all thought back to that fateful day, and to the document that became the cornerstone of the state.

Rotem Elizera, ynetnews.com, 15 January 2018

### Closing points to consider

Is Israel's Declaration of Independence a sacred text? Why or why not?

How do you imagine the State of Israel will look seventy years from now?

The Declaration of Independence may one day become the basis for an Israeli constitution. What would you like to see added, removed, or changed in an Israeli constitution?



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This material was collected by volunteers from Limmud Galil: Tami Hermesh, led by David Biton. Edited by Mikhael Reuven and Robin Moss. Designed by Uri Berkowitz.

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### Reflection upon concluding learning with a partner

טוֹבִים הַשְּׁנַיִם מִן־הָאֶחָד  
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלָהֶם  
שָׂכָר טוֹב בְּעַמְלָם  
קהלת ד:ט

Two are better than one,  
because they have  
a greater reward  
for their toil

Ecclesiastes 4:9



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