

## Yom Ha-Atsmaut - Israel Independence Day

We celebrate Israel's 3<sup>rd</sup> re-establishment on Yom Ha Atsmaut . I'd like to explore the meaning of the establishment of Israel through following R. Arthur Waskow's suggestion that we look at the meaning of the word atsmaut – although i'm not sure that the direction we'll go is what he had in mind.

The root etsem has a number of meanings. one of them is bone: etsem.

Etsem also denotes specificity, identity – as in hu atsmo – he himself, or ad etsem hayom haze – until this very day.

A closely related meaning is essence – the essential nature of a thing is its atsmut.

Another meaning is power – as in otsmah.

I think the use of the root etsem in being atsmo-i, or independent, is a mixture of the last three meanings – identity, essence and power – that is, to be atsmo is to have the power to be what one really is – to explore and manifest one's identity.

Now, the Kabbalists borrowed a rabbinic tradition about an etsem, a bone, at the base of the spine called the luz. The luz is not just an etsem – it is THE etsem – it combines the different meanings of etsem. First – the luz represents the unique identity, place, of each person in the vastness of God's universe – it is atsmo-i – what we are. Second, the luz represents a unique way of being – a way of structuring our life and thought – that expresses our atsmut, or essence. and lastly – if we

structure or life and thought in a way expressing our identity in God's universe, then we experience the flow of *otmah*, or meaning and life-force, into us from God.

Thus being *atsmai* is not just the power to be one's true self, it is that being one's true self is the source of power.

I won't promise you that the *luz* bone is physiologically real, but I'm convinced that it's psychologically real. Torah and *Mitsvot* provide the tools, the frame of reference, through which each one of us seeks our *luz*, our *atsmaut* -*etsem-ut*. Some people find it with the *Chassidim* or *mekubalim*, some with the rationalists – and so on in endless variations.

The Jewish people also have a *luz*, a collective *etsem-ut*, and that is Torah as a whole, with all its internal variations. The Torah had to be given at *Shavuot*, after *Pesach*, because before the people could manifest its unique identity, take its place in God's universe, it had to a) become a people and b) release itself from external bondage. But after *Pesach* Israel is still not *atsmai* – because she has still to discover her true self, her *atsmaut*, in Torah.

The destruction of the Jewish state and *galut* blocked the path from *yitsiat mitsrayim* to *matan torah* – because *galut* is the death of Israel's national life – the death of the body politic, and it's through the body politic of Israel that we live our collective Torah, our collective *atsmaut*, which provides the framework for each of our individual *Toraitic* life paths.

And therefore the re-establishment of the state of Israel is in a sense *tchiyat ha metim* – the resurrection of Israel's body politic. This resurrection opens the path leading from *pesach* to *shavuot*, from *yetsiat mistrayim* to *matan Torah*, from slavery to the freedom, meaning and power of Torah – and that's why it is celebrated now during

sefirot ha-omer which links pesach to shavuot, and that's why it truly is - yom ha-atmaut.

*By Shaiya Rothberg*