

Remembering a time when the whole country celebrated Independence Day

• By SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

For religious Zionists, Yom Ha'atzmaut, Israel's Independence Day, is a day of profound religious significance. The day is observed as a festival, instituted by the Chief Rabbinate, with special prayers offered thanking God for the miraculous birth of the State of Israel.

But in the haredi community, things are different. While a small group of extremists use the day to foment opposition against the "Zionist entity," the day is virtually ignored in the haredi world. Yes, haredim get a day off from work and school, just like the rest of Israel, but they approach Israel's independence with ambivalence.

Times used to be simpler. In the early years that followed the state's founding, Independence Day was celebrated by all sectors: secular, religious, haredi. Hallel was sung in Bnei Brak's Great Synagogue and hassidim dressed in festive frocks and fur hats danced in the streets. Israeli flags flew in haredi neighborhoods – Agudat Israel even encouraging placing them in the window. The day was marked in haredi yeshivot, like Hevron and Ponevezh.

To this day, the flag is flown over the Ponevezh Yeshiva out of deference to its founder, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, who began the practice. Rabbi Kahaneman's feelings toward Yom Ha'atzmaut also led him to omit the reflective Tahanun prayer, traditionally omitted on festive occasions.

In recent years, attempts have been made to whitewash or revise history. But the truth remains that in the early years of statehood, haredim too found religious meaning in the day. They saw the day as an opportune time for national unity and joined together with the rest of the country.

An editorial which appeared in the



HAREDI MEN walk in Jerusalem's Mea She'arim neighborhood. The writer laments the fact that independence Day is ignored in part of the community.

(Marc Israel Sellen/The Jerusalem Post)

haredi newspaper *Hamodia* celebrated Israel's third birthday and encouraged its readers to do the same. The piece, published on the Iyar 4, 1951, began with the following:

"All over the country and throughout the Diaspora, we will celebrate the State of Israel's third Independence Day with military demonstrations, stately ceremonies and gatherings across the country and the Diaspora, together with tens and hundreds of displays and expressions of joy, where the masses will express their excitement for this major historical event.

This holiday is for all citizens of the State of Israel, and any Jew wherever he is, who sees himself as part of the Jewish Nation. On this day, we forget our differences of views and stances. Conflicts and disputes that divide us are closed and buried, and the people will celebrate, united and undivided.

For together as one we went through the War of Independence, with all it entailed. We have all paid a heavy price, with our young sons. And together we share the burden, until today, of the realization of the ingathering of the scattered of Israel, for whose sake of the state was established.

The State of Israel was birthed by religious and non-religious alike, as Jews of every stripe and political or religious affiliation fought for Israel's Independence. They didn't have the luxury of sitting back and being sectarian.

At a time when tensions are high in the State of Israel, the truths of history remind us that we have more in common than what sets us apart. Were we only able to get back to that simpler place in time and, for one day, set aside our differences to celebrate again, "united and undivided."

The author lives and teaches in Jerusalem. His forthcoming book is titled Return Again: The Argument for Aliyah.