Rabbi Joseph Polinsky

YOM HAAZTMAUT & LAG B'OMER

History has its ironies or quirks. Perhaps it would be better to say that G-d guides the world's destiny and within it His moving hand can be seen. The juxtaposition of the two Jewish semi-holidays which we celebrate this month clearly point in this direction - Yom Haatzmaut (or Israel Independence Day) and Lag B'Omer. Yom Haatzmaut, as I am sure you all know, is a very new Jewish holiday. It celebrates the phoenix-like rebirth of the Jewish State in 1948. Among Jews the world over this day has religious connotations. Among some religious circles this holiday is celebrated by reciting Hallel (the Jewish prayer of thanksgiving reserved for special holidays like Passover, Chanukah), and it is looked upon as signalling the first step toward the Messianic era, which in G-d's time will surely follow. Among other religious circles this holiday is looked on as a fulfillment of G-d's promise to Israel and a proof that G-d guides the Jewish people's destiny.

It is interesting to note where in the Jewish calendar this holiday falls. It falls between Pesach and Shavuos, a time of semi-mourning, a time when no weddings are performed (except for two or three specially designated days, Rosh Chodesh and Lag B'Omer) and when personal merrymaking is held to a minimum. The reason for this mourning (at one time this period used to be a very joyous one) is the destruction of the last Jewish sovereign state (132-135 C.E.) and the great loss of life and havoc this wrought, especially to institutions of Jewish learning. Only Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of this 49 day period, is a happy day. It was only on this day, our rabbis tell us, that Rabbi Akiva's pupils (24,000 of them, all of whom were fighting for Jewish independence) stopped dying. It was the loss of this short-lived independence and the ruthless suppression of this revolt which finally sealed the fate of the second Jewish commonwealth (much more than the destruction of the second Temple) and caused us to go into exile.

Now with the establishment of the State of Israel, the results of the holiday of Lag B'Omer and the period it symbolizes are finally being reversed, and our days

of sadness are being turned into days of joy. Let us hope and pray that this is so and will continue to be so, and that the coincidence of Israel Independence Day falling with the period of mourning for Israel's last independent state is no quirk of history but part of G-d's plan, and that surely G-d will, as we pray everyday in the Shmone Esre, remove from us every type of sadness and rule over us He, Himself, in kindness, mercy, and justice.