

Starter Texts prepared by Rabbi Ian Chesir-Teran and Rabbi Lev Meirowitz Nelson

Whether you are giving a sermon, speaking at a rally, writing a message to your community, or teaching a text study, we offer these as starting points for reflection on this momentous milestone.

1 “Abram went forth as THE ETERNAL had commanded him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran.” (Genesis 12:4)

Abram is a fully-formed adult when he hears God’s command to *lech lecha*, go forth, and begins an entirely new chapter of his life. How could Israel’s 75th birthday be an occasion for hearing the divine call, (re)committing to its values, and starting anew?

2 “[Mordechai] raised Hadassah, that is to say Esther.’ (Esther 2:7) The rabbis say Esther was 75 years old... The Holy Blessed One said to Abraham: You went forth from your father’s house at 75; so too the redeemer that I will raise up from your descendants will be 75, like the count* of Hadassah.” (Bereshit Rabbah 39:13)

*This is seemingly a reference to *gematria*, the numeric value of Hebrew letters, but slightly off: the value of ה+ו+ד+ה is 74.

This midrash is surprising and runs counter to our conventional images of Esther as young and beautiful. Similarly, how might Israel’s 75th birthday lead to surprising reevaluations of conventional assumptions? How might redemption come to the Jews and Palestinians — both descendants of Abraham — out of the present moment?

3 Continuing on the theme of *gematria*, 75 equates to “*lamah*” למה, “Why?”

How can we make Israel’s 75th birthday an opportunity for pause and reflection, asking why we do what we do?

4 Spelling 75 out differently yields ע”ה, which is classical rabbinical shorthand for *am ha’arets*. Literally “folk of the land,” *am ha’arets* can have two opposite meanings, depending on context and time period. In the Bible (see, e.g., II Kings 21:24, Jeremiah 34:19, and Genesis 23:7), it seems to denote an elite group of citizens, perhaps tribal elders or officers. In the Talmud, and from there through the ages into vernacular Yiddish, “*amoretz*” refers to boorish, uneducated people.

How do we see Israeli policy as conforming to one or the other of these definitions of *am ha’arets*? What does it mean for Jews to be a responsible “folk of the land,” rooted in the particularity of the Land of Israel?

5 Psalm 75 does not figure prominently in Jewish liturgy, so it catches our attention. It is a concise vision of divine judgment at the end of days. Note especially the closing two lines:

“As for me, I will declare forever,
I will sing a hymn to the God of Jacob.
All the horns of the wicked I will cut;
but the horns of the righteous shall be
lifted up.”

What does justice look like to you? In place of a vengeful God and a zero sum game (see verse 8), can you envision a 75th chapter of Israel’s history grounded in *teshuvah* and restorative justice?