

Activities

- 1) Why was the first order of business (annulling the 1939 White Paper) more significant for Sheref than the actual reading of the Declaration?
- 2) Why do you think Ben Gurion was in mourning while the people were rejoicing, both during the 1947 UN vote and after declaring the State of Israel independent?
- 3) Sheref notes with a bit of irony that after nearly two millennia of Diaspora existence, the ceremony declaring Jewish independence took only 32 minutes. What were the contributions of the Zionist immigrants and pioneers from the previous decades that laid the necessary foundations for that event to occur?



David Ben-Gurion publicly pronounces the Declaration of the State of Israel



The front page of an Israeli newspaper from the Day of Statehood

Excerpts from the book “Three Days”

By Ze'ev Sheref, Secretary of Israel's Government 1948-57

And thus concludes the Scroll of Declaration: “Placing our trust in Tzur Israel (the Rock of Israel, as a reference to God) we affix our signatures to this proclamation at this session of the Provisional Council of the State, on the soil of the homeland, in the City of Tel-Aviv, on this Sabbath Eve, the 5th day of Iyar, May 14th 1948.

And then [Ben Gurion] added: Let us receive the Scroll of Independence of the Jewish State in standing.

The people rose on their feet instantaneously and stood still for few moments – short moments that stretched long and magnified. The Chairman then requested the people to sit down and announced: “As it was agreed upon at the meeting of the People’s Council those members who wish to do so will be able to make their announcements in the next meeting of the Council that will convene on Sunday evening. He then gave the right to speak to Rabbi Y. L. Fishman that tearfully cited in a choked voice: “Blessed are you, Lord, our God, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this season.” At this moment the Museum Hall transformed into a synagogue and all attendees responded in unison: “Amen”.

After the blessing Ben Gurion said that the members of the Council who reside in Jerusalem could not arrive for the occasion gathered at the offices of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and voted unanimously for the Declaration. He then proceeded to read the “manifesto” of the National Provisional Council. When he arrived at the second paragraph that annuls the “White Papers” laws it seemed as if the attendees held their breath and then a storm erupted. It is true and valid: We do have a State. It has the power to enact laws and already we abolished some laws such as the ones that limited immigration of Jews (1941) and the ordinance of 1945 that related to measures in times of emergency. Suddenly the meaningful significance of the establishment of a State dawned upon us. We have witnessed large demonstrations against the rulings of the “White Paper” and launched a struggle to let the ma’apilim ships reach our shores and confront the British and we had huge gatherings and declared days of fasting in protest and young men and women sacrificed their lives. There were appeals to the British High Court and people were hanged by the British and despite of all these actions the “White Paper” still ruled. Now the National Council brought an end to the bitter struggle – and by what seemed like a simple decision annulled the “White Paper”. It no longer exists. The British navy would no longer prevent the ma’apilim boats from reaching our shores and expel the newcomers. There is no longer a quota of 1,500 new immigrants per month. This is, therefore our “State”...

The meeting lasted 32 minutes, during which a Nation declared its liberty after 1887 years of subjugation to many kingdoms and rulers – Rome, Byzantine, the Edomites and Ishmael exiles – West to East. People hugged and congratulated one another. Barriers fell and security measures were lifted. Eyes were filled with tears of joy mixed with sadness about the sons that fell in the battlefield and about the unknown fate of others. But the sadness and the anxieties were suppressed deep in the hearts.

In the meantime huge crowds amassed around the Museum from all the corners of the city. They broke the

security chains of the guards and together with them joined in applauding the attendees who began to exit from the Hall. The streets of Tel Aviv were filled with people who up to that moment listened to the broadcast of the ceremony over the radios and now merged outside with great joy and the whole city celebrated spontaneously with no prior plan or organization.



Ze'ev Sheref, 1948

Everybody bought a copy of a newspaper titled “The Day of the State”. It was the first time that all the newspapers and political parties got together in a joint effort to produce a single publication about the event.

From the open windows the melodies that were broadcast by “Kol Israel” poured into the streets. Light airplanes circled in the skies and showered pamphlets calling upon people to purchase “Independence Bonds” and the day turned into a holiday and the city rejoiced.

On the public boards around the cities workers posted announcements calling the people to join the military and reiterated the need to darken the homes windows at night time (for fear of aerial attacks by the enemy). Among the posted announcements there was also a message from the “Haganah” as follows:

The enemy threatens to invade. We should not underestimate this eminent danger. It may happen soon. The security forces are prepared for such a contingency. The general public should provide all the help that is needed.

1. It is necessary to dig shelters in all cities, towns and villages and follow the instructions of the civil defense forces.
2. Public gathering should be avoided in vacant areas and in the streets.
3. It is imperative to assist the commander of the security forces in setting up barricades and fortifications. Do not panic. Do not be unmindful. Be alert and disciplined.

Signed: The “Haganah”

In the printing shop of “Hapoel Hatzair” (the Young Laborer) the first edition of the “Declaration of Independence” was printed with the names of all Council members though not all had yet signed it. This was done based on a telegram that arrived from Jerusalem confirming the eventual signing of those who were absent. I waited for the first printouts and took two copies, one of which was for David Ben Gurion. When I handed him the copy he said: “What is new in the city?” I replied: “The city is rejoicing.” And he replied: “I’m not filled with joy, only with deep anxiety as I felt on November 29th when I was in mourning among the joyous.”



Celebrations in Israel on Independence Day