

Setting Sail: Israel and America in the 1976 Bicentennial

On July 4, 1976, Americans awoke and began to celebrate 200 years of independence. There were parades, floats, barbecues, fireworks, and special banquets. Americans watched on their televisions as Queen Elizabeth II presented a perfect replica of the Liberty Bell to President Gerald Ford, made from the same steel mill in England as the original.¹ However, while many Americans focused internally, Jewish-Americans were twice as joyous. Not only for their achievements, accomplishments, hardships, and integration into American society, but also upon the news that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have just completed a rescue operation at Entebbe.² As Rabbi Daniel Bouskila later reminisced on the memory “I will also never forget how someone we had just met that weekend – a non-Jew – jumped into the pool, opened a beer and shouted with joy ‘Let’s drink to Israel!’ I will never forget the feeling of celebration that erupted around the pool, and how everyone – Jew and non-Jew alike – celebrated Israel’s remarkable achievement.”³

Spontaneous celebrations like these occurred throughout the United States and illustrated the deep connection between Jewish-Americans, Israel, and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. a special session of the Knesset, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said, “Israel and the United States share a common heritage that rises from a common source.”⁴ But what exactly does mean? And how is this relevant today?

Israel and the United States in the Bicentennial

Israeli-American relations in the early to mid-1970s were directly shaped by the Yom Kippur War and the “step-by-step” approach led by Secretary of State Dr. Henry Kissinger in his Middle Eastern shuttle diplomacy. Their goals was the pursuit of peace, or at least Kissinger’s conception of peace.⁵ The year 1975 proved especially difficult when talks between Israel and Egypt during the second round of negotiations stalled. As a result, President Ford and Kissinger announced that the United States had begun a process of “reassessment” of its relationship with Israel. Ford and Kissinger withheld critical long-

¹ Nick Vadala, “Queen Elizabeth II Was the First Sitting British Monarch to Visit Philly. Here’s What Happened When She Did.,” *Inquirer.com*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia/queen-elizabeth-philadelphia-visit-1976-20220908.html>.

² “Israeli Raid on Entebbe | EBSCO Research Starters,” accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/israeli-raid-entebbe>.

³ Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, “July 4, 1976: A Historic Day of Independence,” *Jewish Journal* (blog), July 4, 2013, 4, <https://jewishjournal.com/israel/118474/july-4-1976-a-historic-day-of-independence/>.

⁴ “Knesset Devotes Special Session to American Bicentennial,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 14, 1976, <https://www.jta.org/archive/knesset-devotes-special-session-to-american-bicentennial>.

⁵ For greater information on Kissinger’s Middle East efforts and his ideological motives, see: Martin Indyk, *Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2021).

term military support for Israel as a means of pressuring it to shift from what they saw as inflexible positions in its negotiations with Egypt.⁶ Kissinger's visits to Tel Aviv and Rabin's visit to Washington in June failed to break the deadlock, and the American Jewish community rallied against Ford's efforts to pressure Israel—especially in light of an increasingly hostile United Nations, which recognized the PLO as the *sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people*,⁷ and passed a General Assembly resolution declaring that Zionism is racism.⁸

While a breakthrough was achieved September of 1975 with the signing of the Sinai Interim Agreement (Sinai II), no further progress occurred during Ford's presidency. As Ford himself began to concentrate on his re-election campaign in 1976, emphasized his support for Israel in his outreach to Jewish-American communities, highlighting the significant U.S. arms shipments to Israel that resulted from Sinai II.⁹ However, Ford was unsure if these new shipments could cover his very public and very controversial reassessment period with Israel. Though his commitment to Israel and its security was ironclad throughout the campaign trail,¹⁰ he avoided emphasizing the substantial military supply to Israel he pushed for after Sinai II as he was told to.¹¹

Israel was also dealing with its own challenges. The new Rabin government, formed after Golda Meir's resignation as the Agranat Commission published its reports on the Yom Kippur War, was unstable and reliant on substantial support from National Religious Party (NRP) which objected to any further disengagement agreements or territorial withdrawals, especially in the West Bank.¹² This political instability, combined with economic downturn resulting from the Yom Kippur War and the increased defense spending, led Israel into a period of slowed economic growth, with the following decade being called by some "the lost decade."¹³

⁶ Indyk, 485.

⁷ "Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO)," ECFR, March 20, 2018, https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/plo/.

⁸ Evelyn Sommer, "Fighting Delegitimization: The United Nation's 'Zionism Is Racism' Resolution, a Case Study," Community, World Jewish Congress (World Jewish Congress), accessed June 2, 2025, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/85th-anniversary/fighting-delegitimization-the-united-nations-zionism-is-racism-resolution-a-case-study>.

⁹ Arlene Lazarowitz, "American Jewish Leaders and President Gerald R. Ford: Disagreements Over The Middle East Reassessment Plan," *American Jewish History* 98, no. 3 (2014): 194.

¹⁰ Lazarowitz, 197.

¹¹ Lazarowitz, 199.

¹² Indyk, *Master of the Game*, 438.

¹³ Zvi Eckstein and Tamar Ramot-Nyska, "Twenty Years of Financial Liberalisation in Israel: 1987–2007," no. 44 (2008): 16.

However, as the bicentennial neared, the kidnapping of Air France Flight 139 by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, along with West German terrorists who diverted the plane to Entebbe International Airport in Uganda, became Israel's primary concern. From June 27 until July 4, Israel engaged in both negotiations with the terrorists and the rapid planning of a daring rescue operation.¹⁴

As the Bicentennial celebrations entered public consciousness, both governments and their populations were exhausted from the political, social, and economic upheaval caused by the Middle East in both Washington and Jerusalem. Yet they did not allow these underlying issues to define their celebrations.

The Red, White, and Blue along the Blue and white

Israel recognized importance of the bicentennial and the opportunity to highlight Israeli American friendship. The Hebrew University held a months-long Bicentennial exhibition, showcasing artifacts of Israeli American relations and American-Jewish history.¹⁵ Israel's major initiative to commemorate and highlight deep US-Israeli cooperation was *Operation Liberty Bell*—the participation of the Israeli Navy in the Bicentennial flotilla as a guest of honor of the U.S. Navy.¹⁶ Setting sail on June 18th, the two ships made the voyage to New York,¹⁷ a journey not undertaken by the Israeli Navy since 1951.¹⁸

Israel's participation was a part of the larger *Operation Sail*, a massive naval parade of hundreds of ships from 30 different nations along the East Coast, with the ships docking in New York City during the Fourth of July. At the same time, aside from a brief helicopter tour above the flotilla, President Ford accompanied the royal couple as they toured the United States and Philadelphia.¹⁹

As the Israeli ships docked in New York Harbor, news of the successful rescue operation began to spread. Israel's ambassador to the United States, Simcha Dinitz, used the Bow of the Israeli ship *ISN Yaffo* to speak to visiting tourists about the successful

¹⁴ "Israeli Raid on Entebbe | EBSCO Research Starters."

¹⁵ "Lady Bird Johnson and Her Daughters in Week-Long Visit to Israel," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 22, 1976, Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), <https://www.jta.org/archive/lady-bird-johnson-and-her-daughters-in-week-long-visit-to-israel>.

¹⁶ "The Missile Boats Trip-Success," *Bein Hagalim*, September 1976, <https://beingalim.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1976-9-bg.pdf>.

¹⁷ "2 Craft Will Represent Israeli Navy at Bicentennial Maritime Review," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, June 29, 1976, Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), <https://www.jta.org/archive/2-craft-will-represent-israeli-navy-at-bicentennial-maritime-review>.

¹⁸ Rami Antian, "Operation 'Liberty Bell,'" *Bein Hagalim*, September 1976, <https://beingalim.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/1976-9-bg.pdf>.

¹⁹ Vadala, "Queen Elizabeth II Was the First Sitting British Monarch to Visit Philly. Here's What Happened When She Did."

rescue operation, while the crowd congratulated and celebrated with the Israeli sailors, as if they themselves had carried out the rescue operation.²⁰ Israeli sailors participated in the march on Broadway, with Israel's flag waving as they paraded north from Battery Park. At a late-night banquet hosted for the sailors, one of them remarked: "Everybody we meet is so excited. They want to shake our hands, some want to kiss us, and the feeling of being an Israeli in New York these days is just out of sight."²¹ It's estimated that around 200,000 Americans have visited both Israeli ships during their tour of the United States, which lasted until August 17, when they returned to Haifa. Among the visitors were the famous American-Jewish violinist Issac Stern, US Secretary of the Navy John William Middendorf II, and many other national, state, and local leaders.

The primary visitors were, of course, American Jews who wanted to both "stand in the land of Israel,"²² and rejoice with the Israelis over the successful rescue operation. This pattern was consistent in Washington, Norfolk, Baltimore, Miami, and Philadelphia. Galas, banquettes, and house parties became the norm for the Israeli sailors, who even got to visit Disney World in Florida.

In Israel, the Knesset held a special session with American-Jewish leaders and U.S. Ambassador to Israel Malcolm Toon. Reflecting on the unique American-Israeli relationship and the Entebbe raid, Rabin said, "I feel that there is a deep link of content and symbol between the two events that took place on that date. Both express the essence of the contents of the Zionist and American revolutions."²³ Reflecting on the session and many other events held in Israel for the Bicentennial, Ambassador Toon concluded that he "hoped when Israel celebrates its Bicentennial, Americans will reciprocate the outpouring of affection and good will displayed by Israelis during the festive Bicentennial events in Israel over the weekend."²⁴

Setting Course

The voyage of the Israeli Navy for the Bicentennial, along with the events that took place in Israel, could easily be seen as an interesting historical anomaly, a convergence of national independence celebrations and the liberation of hostages in Entebbe. Some might

²⁰ Rami Antian, "Operation 'Liberty Bell.'"

²¹ "Reception for Israeli Sailors Turns into Celebration of Rescue Operation," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 8, 1976, Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), <https://www.jta.org/archive/reception-for-israeli-sailors-turns-into-celebration-of-rescue-operation>.

²² According to international maritime law, a ship is an extension of the nation, meaning that stepping into a ship is similar to landing in a new country

²³ "Knesset Devotes Special Session to American Bicentennial."

²⁴ "America's Bicentennial Celebrated in Numerous Events in Israel - Jewish Telegraphic Agency," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, July 7, 1976, <https://www.jta.org/archive/americas-bicentennial-celebrated-in-numerous-events-in-israel>.

point to the immense logistical feat achieved by the Israeli Navy in its transatlantic cruise. Others might highlight that when Israeli ships docked in Portuguese waters for the first time in history, they did so alongside an Egyptian ship—for the first time in history as well.²⁵ However, the voyage of these ships symbolizes far more than the number of visitors or nautical miles traveled. It offers a tangible framework and a way to physically represent the unique relationship between Israel and the United States during the upcoming American celebration.

Operation Sail will take place for the 250th anniversary, much as it did 50 years ago.²⁶ Events like this, along with other large-scale and high-impact initiatives, offer a vital platform for the Jewish-American and Israeli-American communities to stand out and take an active role in shaping the conversation. The climate in the United States since October 7 has placed the American -Jewish community in a position of uncertainty not experienced in generations. As we consider the themes we wish to introduce into the broader national narrative, it is essential to acknowledge Israel's integral role in these events—along with the growing presence of Israeli-Americans within both American and American-Jewish communities. Participating in such events is not only a way to signal presence but also an opportunity to embed the Jewish-American experience more deeply within the American story.

In the coming months, we must challenge ourselves as a community to answer what fundamentally connects Israel and the United States. Rabin emphasized that the two nations share a common heritage that rises from a common source.²⁷ Fifty years later, it is up to us to articulate that connection clearly and definitively—for both the American and Jewish people.

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²⁵ Rami Antian, "Operation 'Liberty Bell.'"

²⁶ "Sail4th 250," Sail4th 250, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.sail4th.org>.

²⁷ "Knesset Devotes Special Session to American Bicentennial."