

9 Days Inspiration

Rabbi Nachman Kahana in conversation with OU Israel's Executive Director Rabbi Avi Berman to explore how Israel has advanced since the establishment of the State, reflecting on its miraculous growth, spiritual achievements, and national resilience. They also share inspiration and vision for Israel's future, offering words of hope and motivation for the next generation as we continue to build and strengthen our homeland.

Transcript

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Sitting here in Yerushalayim. Two Brooklynites born in Maimonides Hospital. But you made aliyah 66 years ago and I made aliyah 40 years ago.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

We didn't make aliyah Avi, we didn't make aliyah, aliyah made us.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

That's your favorite line. I quoted you in Torah Tidbits, and the amount of feedback that I got from people coming and saying, "You know something? Aliyah really did make me. It really did make me."

We're sitting in a week and a time where we're seeing a turmoil of history for the Jewish people happening. You've had the zehut (merit) of living here in Israel for 66 years. Arriving here with your rebbetzin, she should be well and live long to 120, and the Rav for 66 years. You came to a country that looked very, very different than it does today. We're living in a generation where we expect everything to move very fast. You wake up today and say, "Oh, it's the same as it was

yesterday.” Like, what’s happening? Why isn’t anything moving? But the reality is, when you’re able to stand at any viewpoint of Yerushalayim and see the amount of cranes that are building buildings and building everything, it’s incredible.

You have 66 years—is there any one story that sticks out? That says, you know something that this is the essence, this is so much of the meaning of me being in the land of Israel for 66 years.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

There are so many stories and so many instances. I’ve met so many people in these years. I don’t know where to start. So, I’ll start at the beginning.

We were born in Brooklyn. My father was a rabbi in Flatbush. We lived on Quentin Road and West Second Street. It was a very nice shul, upstairs was the real shul, and downstairs was a beit midrash where people would daven on weekdays. And there was the Aron Kodesh, my father sat to the right under a picture of Rav Kook, and on the left side was a fresco of the Old City. An artist had painted it on the wall—not a picture in a frame, on the wall.

When I was about nine or ten, I started coming to shul regularly. My father said, “Now you’re coming regularly, you have to have a place.” He put a chair right in front of the picture of the Old City, Jewish Quarter actually. He said, “This is your place.” I went there whenever I davened, I was there. And at some point I said to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, I said to God, “I’m going to live there one day.”

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Wow.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

When I was 10 years old, the Medina was established. My father called me over and he said, “The Jordanians destroyed everything in that picture. The Hurva Shul, the Tiferet Israel

Shul, nothing remains”.

I said, “but Abba, I prayed to Hashem that I’d live there one day.”

Anyway, the years passed. I met my wife Feiga, came to Israel in 1962 actually, and in 1967, b’ezrat Hashem, came the big neis (miracle), we became sovereign over Yerushalayim for the first time in over 2,000 years. And I was in a fever to live in the Old City. I did all kind of things. I had tremendous 100% of desire and zero money.

About 15 years ago, they started rebuilding the Hurva shul which was destroyed on the same day by the Jordanians in 1948. And about 10 years ago or so, was the consecration of the shul. It was Rosh Chodesh Nissan. And everybody in Jewish religious life was there.

And then we davened, took out the Sefer Torah, opened it, put it down on the table and the Gabai called out come up have an aliyah, Rav Nachman ben HaRav Yechezkel Shraga, he called me. I’m walking up, said to myself “a 10-year-old boy dreaming about living in the Old City, and I got the first aliyah in the rebuilt Hurva. Dreams come true.” And that’s a story from destruction to rebuilding on my personal level. But everybody has their story in this country.

I once met a man who was in Bergen Belson. He said to me, “What was Bergen Belson, 15 minutes as aliyah every single day in Eretz Yisrael”. You can say now, jumping a little bit that what happened two years ago on Shmini Atzeret, this was really a time to say Hallel. We’re in existential danger, people don’t realize Hamas from the south, Hezbollah from the north they all come together they would meet in Tel Aviv. We don’t realize the extent of the neis (miracle), it’s another Chanukah.

But the problem is that we’re so used to miracles in this country, one more miracle doesn’t make an impression. Between

this story and now a lot of things happened. It's not the same country. Everything changed. The people changed. The makeup of society changed.

Just to give you a little example, I used to go to a makolet (supermarket) and used to buy half a loaf of bread with no money. We lived in a wooden hut. Now there are different kind of wooden huts. I picture Lincoln lived in a log cabin. That's a big house. We lived in a broken down hut. I was the rav of a yeshiva high school called Nechalim, between the airport and Petach Tivka.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

It still exists today, a beautiful Yeshiva Nechalim. They don't have any rundown huts anymore. Now it's beautiful homes.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

And I was a rav there, 24 years old, and the other rabbanim were old, they could have been my father, and to this day I don't know why he hired me. Anyway, we became very good friends to this day Rabbi Yosef Ba-Gad.

I recall another little personal thing, when I got married I went to Yeshiva Flatbush High School where I studied in elementary school and asked for work. I was one of the few shomer Shabbos kids in the class. I said, "Well, certainly they will take me". And the principal, who I really respected, said to go to Israel and study at university for 2 years, come back and we'll talk about it. Now I was a little bit hurt, but I understood. Anyway, time passed, two years later we came on aliyah and I was teaching in Nechalim and got a telegram from Mr. Braverman, tzl, to meet him in a hotel in Tel Aviv.

I already understood what was happening. I went to meet him and he said to me, gave me a complement for the work that I did at Nechalim and he offered me to come back to America and teach Gemara in his high school for the highest salary.

I said, "revenge is very sweet". No, I didn't say that really.

I said Mr. Braverman, Flatbush does not have enough money for me to leave Israel. And this, he was a tough man, took me around (in a hug) and he said to me, "your no is more important to me than your yes". And then he died a few months later.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

It's unbelievable. But what gave you at that point already, the self-confidence, the understanding that you should be staying in the land of Israel? He's offering you a position to go similar to what your father did, had an impact in Jewry in North America. So, the rabbi is giving you an opportunity to go back to America to have an influence on an important school.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

I was once criticized by somebody in America for leaving America and not going into chinuch (teaching) in the United States. But my coming to Eretz Yisrael was not an intellectual decision. It was a compulsion. I knew I had to be here. In certain times of my life, very special, I would make a point I've got to remember, relive this moment, this second. And when the plane landed to beautiful Israeli music, and when the door opened up, I took my first breath of the air of Israel. We went down the stairs, my wife and I bent down and kissed the ground. I remember that moment, I can relive it again. For me it was not a question of why to come. I just had to be here.

I always say, you know, that when you come to Israel, it's called you to make aliyah, right? Aliyah, of course, you're coming up. The word aliyah has another inference. When you're called to the Torah,

Rabbi Avi Berman:

You get an aliya.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

When you're called to the Torah, the Gabai does not say, "whoever wants, come up". No. "What's your name? What's your father's name?" It's by name. When you come to Eretz Yisrael, it's by invitation. Min HaShamayim (from heaven), you're called up. You don't come here to the palace of the King uninvited, and don't leave unless you're thrown out.

This week, some big chacham said, "if we're drafted, we're going to leave the country". He doesn't know he's being thrown out from the country. You don't leave this country. Various people here are very special one by one. But anyway, it was a different country than what it is today.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

I remember we were sitting about 15 years ago. And you told me a line that stuck with me. I remember it was right before the Yom Yerushalayim dinner that we had in the Ramada here in Yerushalayim. And you told me, "Avi, if you think back to the Jew that's standing in Auschwitz and he's inside the gas chambers and he has to at that moment think how far am I from the redemption of the Jewish people? We're at such a low point. Avi, if you take that from there until the complete redemption and put it into percentages and look at where we are today, what percentage of what we had to accomplish have we accomplished already?"

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

It's off the page. No percentages over here. Everything is different. Everything now, spiritually we have we created here an empire of Torah. Never was. You take all the biggest yeshiva in Europe whatever, 50 talmidim, 100 talmidim maybe and the yeshiva. In Yeshivas Mir here there are 5,000 other 1000. It's a different thing, a sort of quality.

Everybody thought that this generation is going to be a failure. This war proved that this generation is one of the greatest generations. We have a potential in this generation to be the greatest one that ever lived. I'll give you an

example.

Israel today, we are now in Aza. Aza is two tribes. Aza is Yehuda and Shimon. We're now in Lebanon.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

By the way, the land is divided up to the 12 tribes.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

More or less. We're now in Lebanon. Lebanon is two tribes are Asha and Naftali.

We're now in Syria. Syria is half of the tribe of Manasheh.

We're now in the geographical area of 10 tribes of Am Israel. Two are missing. They're on Trans Jordan. That's Ruben and Gad.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Like we just read this past week in the Parsha.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

And by the way, why did they really want to go there? They say because we need grazing lands. That's not the real reason. But it's not. It really isn't. If Moshe Rabbeinu cannot come to Eretz Yisrael, we're going to bring Eretz Yisrael to Moshe Rabbeinu. Because he was all alone there.

There's a French king, I think Louis the 16th, asked one of his philosopher friends, give me proof there's God in the world. He said two words, "the Jews". The Jews are still alive. After what we wanted to do to them, there's God in the world.

Take a look at Medinat Yisrael. We never had as many people, seven we have almost 8 million Jews in this country. Probably even double of what you have in the world because they say that half the number of Jews in the United States, whatever the number – five, six (million) – they're not halachic Jews. So any number you have there's only half are halachic Jews.

You mentioned the cranes there's such building going on all over the country. And there's another thing, it's a stock market it's a very pressed way of measuring. Just take my car. My car is the oldest car on the road and my car is two years old. Baruch HaShem. Not that everybody here is now living in luxury.

My father was born here in 1904 and explained to me what Eretz Yisrael was. He came to a Yerushalayim when he was 12 years old, once, they traveled at night because you couldn't go during the day because of bandits and other things. It took him a whole week to get from Tzfat to Yerushalayim. Today you get in your car, three hours if you're a bad driver. That's only examples.

There was a study made, that I read, of happiness or satisfaction of people in the country. So Israel is very high on the list, that's with antisemitism. Without it we'd be number one on the list.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

You know, you and your wife brought up a a beautiful family. You have sons that went to the army, became high ranked officers. You have a son that is building up the country, including buildings like the Waldorf Astoria and others. You have daughters that are, Baruch HaShem, bringing life into this world as as midwives. And thank God, you have tremendous nachas from your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Baruch Hashem.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

I have a great granddaughter who's 20 years old.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Okay. Maybe one of our viewers are going to call you for a shidduch.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

My sons, they're all born, all brought up in the old city.

That's a special kind of, you know, a special kind of an atmosphere over there. The oldest son is a project manager of big projects of building. You mentioned the Waldorf Astoria. My second son, Chanoch, is a Ram Yeshiva in Chevron, and the youngest son he's a general in the army ,brigadier general. They're all now in the army. The oldest son is 62 years old and the baby, the general, is 56.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Some baby.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Some baby. We have two daughters who are midwives. Another daughter who is an expert in trees. A tree. She works for the Iriah, for the city, when they have to take down the tree, put up a tree. How did that happen? Anyway, she's expert in the trees. And Baruch HaShem, many grandchildren, not enough. Many great-grandchildren also not enough. Baruch HaShem.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

You didn't say not enough about children.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Enough children.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

When you walk around this country, whether it's Yerushalayim or anywhere else, are there any specific places that you come to that you remember walking there or going on hikes there and now you see it into?

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

I'll tell you, the family for the most part, were in the underground before the medina was created. The family from Tzfah, that was the orientation. And I had one of my cousins he was an officer in the Etzel, the underground, the commander was (Menachem) Begin and there was a period of time we would meet once a month in Yerushalayim and he would show me places what he did, what the Etzel did, and all these place don't

exist anymore because they're built up. And whenever I go to these places, I remember what he told me. And then I recalled when I came here, I said, "What am I coming to? There's no more underground. There's no more what do you call the British mandate. There's no everything's done already."

Rabbi Avi Berman:

It's boring.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Boring. 1962.

We had an aunt, in 1938 she was going with the family, an aunt by marriage, with children from a wedding from Haifa to Tzfat and the taxi was attacked by Arabs and they killed everyone in the taxi. When my aunt and some cousins, one cousin a little girl her mother fell on her, and that made the family to go leave the cheder, old Tzfat Chassidim, leave the cheder and join the Etzel. The family is for the most part Dati Leumi (national religious), we feel Yad HaShem in everything here.

Then of course comes the embarrassing, I don't know what to call, the embarrassing subject of Chareidim not going to the army, but obviously I have to respect their point of view because they're Rabbanim, by their point of view. But my opinion is that they're wrong and I say actually one of the greatest moments of my life I could say, was when I was drafted putting on the uniform in basic training. I was in the army for 22 years in the air force. I'm not a pilot exactly but as anti-aircraft I was in the desert in the Sinai.

I can only say that not everyone has the sachel (natural common sense) to come here. It's the greatest thing in the world. The greatest experience for a person is to be born a Jew. We say Mishnechnas when Adar comes in, we we expand some happiness. When Av comes in we detract, but it's always a happiness. The question is to what degree more or less?

But nothing has no happiness. That's the standard. What can I

say?

Rabbi Avi Berman:

You know, I ask myself, what is the difference between a Tisha b'Av that the Jews were sitting on the floor a hundred years after the Churban Beit HaMikdash, after the destruction of the second temple, no matter where they are in the world, they're sitting on the floor on Tisha B'Av and crying. And then take fast forward 500 years. What progress did the Jewish people make in those 500 years?

The gullis probably got deeper. More killed. The amount of pogroms increased. Take a thousand years. Take 1500 years.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Same story.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Same story. And the Jews had such emunah. Such emunah and they continue sitting on the floor every single year in Tisha B'Av. But then you take Tisha B'Av literally a hundred years ago. 100 years ago in 1925, Jews are sitting on the floor after a first world war.

I'm not sure maybe Talmidim ha-Gra (disciples of the Vilna Gaon) came to Israel. A few people started coming already starting to build the country, but for the most part British mandate. And they're sitting on the floor. And take that hundred years and look at the progress that we've made in the last hundred years. It's absolutely remarkable.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Remarkable is not the word. It's unnatural such a progress in every field and endeavor today Israel is one of the leaders, and all this is done always under the shadow of a war – either a war happening or going to be a war something. Imagine if we didn't have to give out all that money for security what this country would be. Billions, billions and billions to build up the country and raise the standard of living, but that's what

it is. It's what Hashem made.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

But the flip side is the fact that the Arabs constantly try to attack us or the Muslims, our terrorists, whether it's Hamas or Hezbollah or Iran, has brought Israel to a stage where we're developing technologies and intelligence mechanisms that we're able to sell today around the world for billions and billions and billions.

Today, Europe are looking to buy up Israeli systems, whether it's Spider or Arrow or you name it, to defend themselves from their enemies. So, we're protecting not only the Jewish people, but we're protecting, you know, good countries around the world. They're trying to just defend their their citizens and we're making billions of dollars on the way.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Now I always wonder where people who have sechel history has shown time again and again those are people those people that came against Am Yisrael they went to the garbage bin of history. Those that supported Am Yisrael and they don't learn – the goyim just don't learn they don't understand it – that the Torah mentioned the Arabs you mentioned.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

It's written the Torah. It's not hard to understand – if you support the Jewish people, you'll be blessed. If, God forbid, the opposite, you'll be cursed.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Let's talk in the human terms. You have in the Middle East, you have the money, Arab money, Arab workforce and Jewish intelligence that can be gotten, anything on this planet.

But the hate is so great and the irrational hate and they just want to destroy the Jewish people and the more they want to destroy us the more they destroy themselves. We go up and up

all the time. But the question is, but take a look the country, there are people who are mechallel Shabbat (desecrating Shabbat), there are aveiros (sins), it's not exactly what the satan would like it to be yet we progress all the time.

HaKodesh Baruch Hu, what about onesh – you do good you get a reward. If you do averiot, sin,s and you get punished, we do sins and we're getting a reward. He said that's the time, that's a sign of the Moshiach. Where HaShem doesn't look at the bad things, only look at the good things. And there's so much good here in the people. Israeli people a little tough on the outside, but they're sweet on the inside.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

That's why they call them sabras.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Sabras. Yeah.

But one thing I see, I can measure the difference between me and my children and grandchildren. They're sabras, but I still have a little bit of goyishkeit a little bit to me. I would see a baseball game. I would stop and watch it. But on the inside, they are Israelis, sabras and I'm so happy for that.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

So you gotta understand that that a neshamah that comes down to this world in Israel, must be a totally different neshamah than HaKodesh Baruch Hu brings down anywhere else in the world.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Nahon (correct). The Zohar says that someone that comes from to chutz laaretz (outside the land of Israel) to live here on the first night he's gets a "אור אלהים אמת" whatever that means.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

And the zechut that a person has for deciding to leave their life outside of Israel and bring it into Israel, and sell their house and move to Israel, and go through – it's not easy right. We know that the land of Israel is not acquired without triumphs, but thank God we see the thousands and thousands that are coming every year from North America and the thousands of thousands that are coming from countries all over all over the world.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

In more time, even more in time.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Thank God seeing success.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Life is divided between two things decisions and implementation. That's what everything is all about all day long making decisions. Implications are much easier than decision making to decide, like you said, to pick yourself up and change your life and everything is different than to move to Asia. What am I doing in Asia? I born I born in Poughkeepsie, but do that. Hashem helps you once you make that decision things start happening.

There was a period in my life for two years when I took a vacation from Yeshiva and the Kollel. I was the head of the Chief Rabbi's Kollel for three years and I was assistant to the Minister of Religious Affairs.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Warhaftig.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

That Dr. Warhaftig, tzadik, he is a man.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

He signed on the Megillat HaAtzmaut. The Declaration of independence.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Nahon. He saved thousands of people in the Shoah. He was a lawyer and he wrote a book about how we did this kind of things. But I saw the inner workings of the Medinat Israel.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

And that's why you think it's such a big miracle.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

You said it. But I saw on the political level, or the level, there is something lacking in Yiddishkeit but the people are much more advanced spiritually than the leaders are. The people even people who are not so Dati, but they are dati. I'm always happy to see when I see for example someone who is obviously not religious but going into a store and kissing the mezuzah. Everyone has it here. Politically that's a different look.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Look at the mesirat nefesh that we're seeing from the secular world. In fighting for the Jewish people and defending the Jewish people and developing the land of Israel. It's remarkable.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

I asked a question in the Shamayim which we don't know the calculation in the Shamayim. Someone who is secular, not someone who's an apikoros or who's an atheist, a Jew, lights candle on Friday night, puts on the television – that's like the majority here, versus someone who's very very very religious or observant in chutz laaretz. Who is bigger, who is more important in the spiritual world. A man lives and breathes 24 hours a day in Eretz Yisrael vs. someone...

I remember saying, the Gemara says they said to Rabbi Yochanan there are old age people living in Babylon. How can that be? Because the pasuk says in Kriyat Shema, I will increase the life of of you in Eretz Israel.

How could we have older the people living in chutz laaretz, that's a gift given to Eretz Yisrael. They said to him because over there they go to shul in the morning and the evening. So that's what the Gemara says, but what does it mean? It means that a shul is like part of Eretz Yisrael, it has kedusha. They go to daven in the morning and evening they're not they're not disconnecting.

Then some man said in that case I don't have to come here I can live in chutz laaretz, I'll go to shul in the morning, and in the afternoon. I said yeah that you also have the aveira that you're leaving Eretz Yisrael twice a day – and the aveira is bigger than the mitzah that you get.

The question is but people here, remember no one has to come here, no one is forced to come here. Everybody living here is because he wants to live here.

They tell and that's once in the Haifa harbor there were two ships. One with coming up, the other going down. And both ships met each other and the passengers run towards each other. They both scream one word, "meshuga!" Where are you going? Where are you going?

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Listen, the reality is we have more and more Jews coming every day and especially in times like this. It's comforting to see how many Jews are feeling more and more connected to the father in heaven.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

B'ezrat HaShem, we're now in the nine days. Days of semi-mourning. But the Navi Zecharia promises us that all these fasts that have to do with the destruction are going to become holidays. B'ezrat HaShem. And Tisha B'Av will be a big holiday. We should all eat and drink and feast on Tisha B'Av. B'ezrat HaShem.

Israel says "b'yachad natzneah", together we shall be

victorious.

What does together mean? The Tzohar says "God, the Torah, and Israel are one". That's the together. Together we will be.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

We stand every Tisha B'Av and we say tefilla that we add to Shmoneh Esrei, the silent amida, and it talks about nachem, right, where we're talking about Yerushalayim is deserted, that it doesn't have its children and I stand every single Tisha B'Av and I say this tefilla and have a rough time. Like how could I possibly be unthankful to God and continue saying that his children are not home after our father in heaven has done so many miracles to bring back his children? How do we say these words today? There's so much more to do. But how do we not have the hakarat hatov for all that has been?

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

We don't change. We don't change because we're we are stuck. We don't have the institutions to be able to change halachot. But you can add a word here and there in davening, add the word "was", add one word that's all then everything fits into place.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

What I've been trying to do is think of areas that still need to be developed. And I say Tisha B'Av is the one day a year I'm going to focus on the areas that still need to be developed and less on the areas that have already been developed.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Leave something for the Mashiach. Don't take it all for yourself. Let him, let him do something to finish the land. What am I doing? Remember, an extra thing, I'm a Kohen. I've been unemployed for 2,000 years. I want to work a little bit.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

It's about time.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

I say basement should be built. What job do I want? Give me a broom. That's enough for me, as a sweeper.

Just let me see it.

Rabbi Avi Berman:

Thank you very much. It's a real honor.

Rabbi Nachman Kahana:

Thank you. Thank you for listening.