

Special 'Hi All' for Yom HaAtzmaut by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Eretz Yisrael

This week, we celebrate Israel's 75th birthday and we could all benefit from a bit of chizuk, and the reason is rather simple: We are so put upon by the world to apologize and explain ourselves, so much so that all too often we doubt the legitimacy of our historic and religious rights and claim to this special Land. We freely grant others their narrative of the etiology of the current conflict without so much as challenging them on the facts of history. (As Patrick Moynihan famously once said, "A person may be entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.")

That said, we need to understand the following theological truth. At the dawn of our history, Gd tells Avraham, "To your seed I have given this Land." The Yerushalmi (Challa 2:58) picks up on the past tense ("have given") and comments, K'VAR NATATI, it was already given. In other words, it was Gd Himself who sanctified this Land and bequeathed it to us through His promise to Avraham and to his descendants. But this sanctification does not tell the

whole story. When HaShem acts, He expects us to respond. Take Shabbat, for example. Gd sanctified the Seventh Day from Creation and yet we are obligated to make Kiddush every Friday night. Our obligation is rooted in Gd's act of sanctification which requires - obligates us - to sanctify the day as well. How? Through abstention from work, through Torah and prayer, song and food.

So too with the Land. Once HaShem created KEDUSHAT HA'ARETZ (the sanctity of the Land), we were expected to validate that holiness, grant it significance by recognizing the singular uniqueness of this piece of geography for our collective destiny. How? By making aliya or at the very least by feeling the tension of living in the Diaspora, by affirming our peoplehood and national purpose, by our devotion to Torah and mitzvot without which there can be no permanent residency in the Land, and ... at minimum, by recognizing that in one very special moment of time, after some 2000 years, we were granted the precious gift of Jewish sovereignty over our Land. For that gift alone, how can we not thank Gd?

Certainly, there is clearly much that needs to be done. None of the above can excuse SINAT CHINAM (needless

hatred) and gross insensitivity to the needs of others, but none of these misdeeds ought to ever blind us to the fundamental truths that bind us irrevocably to this Land. Had we surrendered to such individual and collective guilt, we never would have returned to Zion.

Today, we are again being challenged as we were once during the First and Second Temples. This time, with the help of Gd, may we be strong enough, wise enough, to get it right and merit redemption.

Future Redemption

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) tells us that upon reaching the Heavenly Tribunal after our 120 years, we will be asked a number of questions:

- 1) Were we honest in our business dealings?
- 2) Did we set aside time to study Torah?
- 3) Did we raise a family?

The 4th question is quite interesting: Did we eagerly anticipate the (G-d's) salvation?

Now, with the first 3, in each of these cases, if our answers are wanting, the reason can be related to a specific violation of HaShem's mitzvot. To illustrate:

1) If we weren't honest, we transgressed many prohibitions.

2) If we were negligent in learning Torah, we failed to comply with a clear Biblical mandate to study the Torah.

3) Not having (or adopting) children fails to fulfill the mitzva of procreation.

The rather clear question regarding the 4th inquiry is what exactly are we missing by not longing for the redemption? R. Yitzchok of Corbeil (13th century), author of the Sefer Mitzvot Katan, offers the following remarkable answer. When one does not yearn for redemption, one does indeed commit a sin, but what is it? The answer: it reflects a lack of faith in G-d's Providence. To explain:

We are all expected to believe in G-d, but precisely what does this mean? To believe that G-d exists? Not enough. To believe that G-d created the Universe? Also, not enough. From a classic Jewish perspective, to believe in HaShem means to believe in a G-d of history who is intimately (albeit mysteriously) involved in the affairs of man in general and in the personal destiny of each individual in particular. It means to believe that G-d has a plan for mankind (and each of us), and that that plan involves a

redemptive process in which every one of us can and has a contribution to make. It is indeed a wondrous goal that will see its fulfillment in a glorious Messianic era.

When we bless the State of Israel, the central theological phrase is: "[... the State of Israel] the beginning of the flowering of our redemption." In 1948, there was a spiritual euphoria, a deep, religious stirring experienced throughout the Jewish world. You would have to hear from those who were old enough to remember and understand the momentous significance of this event. Rabbis from every religious sector in Israel saw in the founding of the State the clear and unmistakable YAD HASHEM (Hand of G-d). Everyone who really believed, who eagerly anticipated HaShem's salvation, who knew how to answer the 4th question, they understood what the establishment of the State of Israel meant.

The challenge then and to all subsequent generations - ours being no exception - has been to try and be worthy of HaShem's chesed, to try and help realize not just the "beginning of the flowering", but the actual and complete redemption. May it only be so!

Miracles

Ben-Gurion once famously said, "In Israel, in order to be a realist, one must believe in miracles." Indeed, what happened in 1948 was nothing short of miraculous. What many do not know is the extent to which this belief was shared by the vast majority of the religious rabbinate both in Israel and world over.

As an example, I was recently made aware of a letter penned by Rav Eliyahu Dessler in Elul of 1948. In it, this great sage describes his desire to soon make aliyah. And then, he writes as follows (my free translation).

"The coming Rosh Hashana [the first after the founding of the Medina] is the first Day of Judgement on which G-d will test our deeds to see how we have responded to the many clear miracles - miracles without end - that HaShem performed for us in the past year. This Rosh Hashana is different than those of the past. Why? Because now what must be taken into account is the incredible spiritual arousal inspired by these open miracles and the accompanying fear that - G-d forbid - we may not have learned what we should have from these events. It is incumbent upon us to beseech HaShem's mercy that these miracles not cease and that we may

continue to merit their presence."

The statement is remarkable because it expresses what the great religious giants felt at that time. They were witness to living through a miraculous time in history. They fervently attributed the founding of the State of Israel to G-d's compassionate intervention in the affairs of man. And they all prayed that G-d's salvation would continue. All the great and pious rabbanim in Israel at the time signed their names to a document which proclaimed the State to be "the beginning of the redemption". It must have been a special time.

It's been 75 years, and the "beginning of the redemption" is still just the beginning. The words of Rav Dessler were later echoed by Rav Soloveitchik years later. The message was the same. KOL DODI DOFEK. There are moments in history when G-d comes knocking. The only question is whether we will respond as we should.

Yom Ha'atzmaut Samei'ach!