

The Beginning of the Beginning

Rabbi Yonatan Kohn

Sgan Mashgiach, Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh

Much has been made over the phrase in the popular “Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel” that refers to the State as *reishit tzmihat geulateinu*, the beginning of the blossoming of our Redemption. Even among those congregations and *minyanim* in which a prayer is indeed recited for the Jewish State, the hesitance to commit to the theological position of such a phrase causes many to alter or omit this phrase or to choose a different prayer altogether. It goes without saying that this is not simply a matter of an extra second spent in *shul*; the handling of the phrase reflects the most basic attitudes to the religious significance of the founding of the State.

The arguments in favor of the Messianic significance of the State are more or less clear. The Prophets speak of the ingathering of the exiles⁵¹ and the blossoming of the Land’s produce and natural bounty,⁵² both in the context of the ultimate Redemption. Israel’s propitious population growth, anchored by the immigration of Jews from every corner of the globe, is undeniable. And there is no questioning Israel’s agriculture is in boom, as attested by any trip to an Israeli supermarket or a survey of Israel’s international produce exports. The advocates of this position see in the pulse and flow of daily life and current events a divinely ordained drama that sets the stage for the arrival of *Mashiach* and the rebuilding of the *Mikdash*.

But others are less visionary in their appraisal of the State. In a public lecture at Yeshiva University’s Gruss Campus in Jerusalem, Rav Meir Lichtenstein, shlit”a, explored the nuanced approach of his grandfather, Rav Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, z”l.⁵³ Underscoring citations from works published in the Rav’s lifetime, Rav Lichtenstein emphasized that his grandfather was not a religious Zionist in the mold of the Mercaz Harav school. Rav Soloveitchik saw significance and profound opportunity in the founding of the State, but he did not see it with prophetic and Messianic overtones, with the promise that the State’s founding was a herald for the imminent Redemption. The Rav was consistent in his cautionary stance that we mustn’t presume to know what God is thinking.

This does not mean that Yom HaAtzmaut is only a holiday for those of the Messianic school. Even without ascribing to the belief of *reishit tzmihat geulateinu*, many have found developments

⁵¹ Isaiah 11:12.

⁵² Yechezkel 36:8.

⁵³ www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/724719

worthy of thanksgiving and celebration in the advent of the modern State. For the first time since the destruction of the second *Mikdash*, Israel is the largest Jewish community in the world. If demographic trends continue, most of the Jewish people will be living in the Holy Land in the foreseeable future. There has been a revival of the widespread observances of the agricultural *mitzvot*, including *shemittah*. Immigrating Jews have found a home free of religious and physical persecution, and a militarily formidable Jewish army protects the Jews from hostile enemies. Finally, and very significantly, the Jewish government provides infrastructure and financial support for broad *mitzvah* observance. The government widely protects *Shabbat* and *kashrut*, builds *mikvaot*, and funds thousands of *yeshivot*, *kollelim*, and institutions of Torah learning.

Whence, therefore, is the resistance to observing Yom Ha'Atzmaut?⁵⁴ It would seem that there are three considerations on which to oppose the celebration of Yom Ha'Atzmaut. First, the essential nature of the State alone may not be enough to demonstrate the inherent greatness of the 5th of Iyar, particularly during the mourning season of the *sefirat haomer*.

More substantively, the enumerated religious triumphs linked to the State tell only an incomplete story. It is the same government whose very structure is founded upon the legal norms and principles of secular legal systems, some of which have roots in ancient pagan cultures. As such, a secular majority continues to lead lifestyles ignoring the authority of the Torah in the Land of Israel. The government continues to introduce legislation that passively (and sometimes actively) opposes or confounds Torah observance. Most frustratingly for some, the same government whose mandate is to protect Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel has found itself removing Jews from their homes.

But finally, there is yet another consideration that may be invoked in opposition to the observance of Yom Ha'Atzmaut. And as we will see, this consideration should serve as the key to bridging the gaps on this conflicted issue and inform a renewed purpose on Yom Ha'Atzmaut. Even if the modern State of Israel constitutes the beginning of the Messianic processes, why should the beginning mandate its own holiday?⁵⁵ More pointedly, so long as the process is incomplete, the greatest factor is prominently absent, and the theoretical beginning remains inconclusive.

Yom Ha'Atzmaut: Opportunity and Challenge

No one in the *reishit tzmihat geulateinu* camp will argue that *Mashiach* has already come and that we do not await his arrival. This obvious but startling acknowledgment should have immediate implications for understanding the significance of Yom Ha'Atzmaut. Firstly, the process of Redemption has not completely unfolded. Secondly, Jewish inheritance of the land is subject to the approval of *Hashem*. The land is His, and we do not (yet) have a permanent hold upon it.

⁵⁴ The anti-Zionist position of *Vayoel Moshe* is explored at length elsewhere and is not within the parameters of the current discussion.

⁵⁵ Arukh HaShulhan, Orach Chaim 430:2, mentions matter-of-factly that there is no special observance or commemoration of the day on which Yehoshua led the nation across the Jordan River, under miraculous circumstances.

Overstating our claim to the Promised Land of Israel can have disastrous criminal consequences. In the Torah's description of the dispute that separated Avraham and his nephew Lot, there is little indication as to what is the root cause of their conflict.

There was an argument between the shepherds of the cattle of Avram and between the shepherds of the cattle of Lot, and the Kena'anite and Perizite were then settling the land

Bereshit 13:7

ויהי ריב בין רעי מקנה אברם
ובין רעי מקנה לוט והכנעני
והפרזי אז ישב בארץ
בראשית יג:ז

Noting the emphasis on the role of the shepherds in the dispute, as well as the conspicuous mention over the other peoples living in Kena'an, Chaza"l understood that the conflict here surrounded the issue of entitlement to the land.⁵⁶ Lot's shepherds allowed their animals to graze freely from all the fields in Kena'an, arguing that Lot was the rightful heir to the land promised to Avraham. But Avraham's shepherds insisted that such a practice was stealing; so long as the other nations remained in the land, the land had not yet been given to Avraham.

This approach tightly complements Rashi's observation at the beginning of Bereishit (1:1) "All of the earth belongs to the Holy One blessed be He. He created it and gave it to whoever was fit in His eyes." Ultimately, the Land of Israel remains Hashem's own property. Our inhabitation of the land is ever provisional and contingent.

Do not become defiled in all these, for in all these were defiled the nations that I send from before you. And the land became defiled and I accounted its sin upon it, and the land purged its inhabitants. You observe my statutes and laws and do not commit any of these abominations, the citizen and the stranger among you. For all these abominations [they] did, the people of the land that were before you, and the land became defiled. And the land shall not purge you in your defiling it, as it purged the nation that was before you.

Vayikra 18: 24-28

אל תטמאו בכל אלה כי בכל אלה נטמאו הגוים אשר אני משלח מפניכם: ותטמא הארץ ואפקד עונה עליה ותקא הארץ את ישביה: ושמרתם אתם את חקתי ואת משפטי ולא תעשו מכל התועבת האלה האזרח והגר הגר בתוכם: כי את כל התועבת האל עשו אנשי הארץ אשר לפניכם ותטמא הארץ: ולא תקיא הארץ אתכם בטמאכם אתה כאשר קאה את הגוי אשר לפניכם:

ויקרא יח:כד-כח

Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah, expands at great length upon this special aspect of the Land of Israel.

Behold, He sanctified the nation living in His land with the sanctity of forbidden relationships and the multitudes of commandments so that they should be for His sake. And therefore [Scripture] says (Shemot 20:22) "Observe all My laws and all My statutes and perform them, and the land will not purge you," and it is written (20:24) "And I said to you, 'You will inherit their earth and I will give it to you to inherit it, I am Hashem your God Who has separated you from the nations.'" That is to say that He separated us from all the

...והנה קידש העם היושב בארצו בקדושת העריות וברובי המצות להיותם לשמו, ולכך אמר (להלן כ כב) ושמרתם את כל חוקותי ואת כל משפטי ועשיתם אותם ולא תקיא אתכם הארץ, וכתוב (שם פסוק כד) ואמר לכם אתם תירשו את אדמתם ואני אתננה לכם לרשת אותה אני ה' אלהיכם אשר הבדלתי אתכם מן העמים, יאמר כי

⁵⁶ Bereishit Raba 41:5, also relayed by Rashi in his comments on Bereishit 13:7.

nations, [in] that He placed upon them ministers and other gods, in His giving us the Land that He blessed be He should be a God for us, and we would be singled out for His sake. And the Land which is the portion of the honored Name will purge all who defiles it and will not tolerate the idolaters and exploiters of forbidden relationships.

הבדיל אותנו מכל העמים אשר נתן עליהם שרים ואלהים אחרים, בתתו לנו את הארץ שיהיה הוא יתברך לנו לאלהים ונהיה מיוחדים לשמו. והנה הארץ שהיא נחלת השם הנכבד תקיא כל מטמא אותה ולא תסבול עובדי ע"ז ומגלים עריות...

Ramban goes on to explain that numerous offences were exacerbated by the fact that they were committed in the Holy Land, that their having been committed would be more readily excused on foreign ground. But the Land does not have a high tolerance for rebelliousness. Moreover, Ramban argues, the primary observance of commandments is specifically and exclusively in the Promised Land. Observing the Torah in the Exile is an exercise in preserving the commandments for their primary function more than meaningful for its own purposes.

From this perspective, the advent of Jewish governance in the Promised Land of Israel assumes a completely different role. For other nations, the luster of independence lies in the inherent value of freedom, of release from oppressive, corrupt, or incompetent authority. Independence is meaningful as such, even without visions or goals regarding the application of that independence. But that cannot be the case when it comes to Jewish rule in the Land of Israel. The great meaning behind our freedom is freedom to protect our covenant with Hashem unmolested by hostile host countries; it is freedom to firmly establish the ideal kingdom of which our ancestors dreamed, a kingdom whose governance and maintenance reflect the glorious name of God.

In this light, we may suggest that Yom Ha'Atzmaut should not be cast in a light of enraptured and fantastical Messianism. Even if we have seen the fulfillment of some prophecies, it is clear that we have not seen the fulfillment of them all. And we need not be complacently satisfied, to cease to yearn for more, with that which we have seen. It should be emphasized that Yom Ha'Atzmaut represents a *reishit*, a point of departure.

Yom Ha'Atzmaut is not merely a reflective celebration of events past, of a joyous moment in 1948 when the flag was raised and the people danced in the streets. No doubt, the events of the 5th of Iyar were watershed events. Their import has proven profound, and it would seem a religious imperative to show our gratitude in an exceptional manner. But Yom Ha'Atzmaut is also a day that renews demands upon us, to further vision and to act with more dedication. The day calls upon us to make of the modern State a true *reishit*, a starting point, for the fulfillment of sacred visions and promises. May we merit seeing them speedily in our days.