

# The Religious Significance of the State of Israel

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Dictionaries<sup>69</sup> tend to define the words 'state', 'nation' and 'religion' in the following fashion:

**State:** A set of institutions that possess the authority to govern the people in a society, having internal and external sovereignty over a definite territory.

**Nation:** A grouping of people who share a common history, culture, language or ethnic origin.

**Religion:** A set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe, usually involving devotional and ritual observances, and often containing a moral code governing the conduct of human affairs.

In the year 70 CE, in the aftermath of the burning of the second temple, Jerusalem was left in ruins and the Jewish people was dispersed amongst the nations of the world. These events marked the end not only of the Temple as a religious center but also the end of Jewish statehood and nationality. No longer were the Jewish people sovereign over a defined territory. No longer did it possess any form of self governance. Jewish communal culture, language and history began to lose coherence, to gradually grow apart and differ. This clear and simple understanding of the term *Galut*, i.e. exile is adopted by the Maharal of Prague in his work *Netzach Yisrael* (chap 1). He defines *Galut* as possessing three central characteristics: the physical displacement of the Jewish people from the land of Israel, dispersion and finally subjugation to other nations. As these facets of statehood and nationality were lost, the only element remaining to define and sustain Jewish peoplehood throughout the darkness of exile was religion, or more specifically, a pattern of life revolving around *Halacha* and observance. According to Maharal, this is what the sages of the Talmud mean when they say:

*Since the day of the destruction of the Temple, all that God has in this world is the four cubits of halacha.*

**Brachot 8a**

מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקדוש ברוך  
הוא בעולמו אלא ארבע אמות של הלכה  
בלבד.  
מסכת ברכות דף ה.

<sup>69</sup> See [wordnetweb.princeton.edu](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu)

This is not a maximalist statement, one that expands the scope of the God-Israel relation, but rather a minimalist one, one that narrows the scope of the Jewish people's relationship with God. Whereas formally the Jewish people's covenant with God encompassed all facets of individual and national life, it was now confined to the smallest possible realm of individual life and observance – four cubits.

The events of the past three generations have placed the Jewish people in a fundamentally different situation. The State of Israel is now the home of the single largest Jewish community in the world, and enjoys full sovereignty over both its internal and external affairs. The fate of the Jewish people as a nation no longer lies in the hands of foreign nations and rulers, but rather in its own. An apparently dead, or at least comatose, language has come back to every day life and a unified culture and history is being created anew by a highly diverse group of Jews who have returned to Israel, or descend from Jews who have returned to Israel from various locales around the world.

The obvious centrality of the State of Israel to Jewish identity in the modern era is by no means confined to the citizens of Israel. Indeed, the existence of the State has transformed the communal identity of Jews the world over. With the decline of the status of *halacha* and adherence to observance of the commandments that has occurred over the course of the last two hundred years, the State of Israel now serves as the most fundamental common denominator of Jewish identity.

These events and developments have led to the widespread intuitive understanding that the return to a national life in Israel in our time constitutes a shift of Biblical proportions in Jewish history which deeply impacts our perspective and understanding of Jewish identity and life; in short, that the exile has ended and is no more. This orientation, in varying degrees, is shared by most of world Jewry today and dominates Israeli society in particular.

It is surprising therefore, to find that many religious authorities oppose these conclusions and claim that nothing fundamental has changed. The most common arguments against the idea that the exile has ended can be grouped into four categories:

1) Time – the end of the exile is supposed to be sudden, going from the depths of darkness to perfection instantaneously. 2) Setbacks – the setbacks and difficulties experienced by Israel in the past few decades prove the exile has not ended. 3) Spiritual level - tradition teaches that the exile will end only when the entire Jewish people return to full observance. 4) Leadership and Expectations – the personalities leading the historical events or the events themselves do not fit with our expectations.

As a counterargument, I suggest examining these arguments through the prism of the first and second redemptions, the Exodus from Egypt and the Second Temple period. Hopefully, this will reveal recurring patterns in the processes of redemption in the past and illuminate the developments of the modern era. I will present the relevant sources 'as is' with only slight remarks where clarification is necessary.

# First Redemption – The Exodus

Time:

*And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt... that he built the house of the Lord*

**I Kings 6:1**

ויהי בשמונים שנה וארבע מאות שנה  
לצאת בני ישראל מארץ מצרים ... ויבן  
הבית ה':  
מלכים א' ו:א

The 480 years refer to the full span of the First Redemption, from the Exodus until the peak of the redemption – the completion of the First Temple by King Solomon.

Setbacks:

*And Moses returned to the Lord, and said, Lord, why have You done evil to this people?... For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to this people; neither have You saved Your people at all.*

**Shemot 5: 22-23**

וישב משה אל ה' ויאמר אדני למה  
הרעתה לעם הזה ... ומאז באתי אל  
פרעה לדבר בשמך הרע לעם הזה  
והצל לא הצלת את עמך:  
שמות ה:כב-כג

This was only the first of many setbacks during the 480 year time period. Others were the sin of the golden calf, the sin of the spies as well as most of the period of the Judges.

Spiritual Level:

*The angels said to God what did you see to spare them (the Jewish people) and plague them (the Egyptians)? These are idol worshipers and these are idol worshipers.<sup>70</sup>*

**Yalkut Har'uveni, Beshalach, 82**

Leadership and Expectations:

*At the time Moshe came to the people and told them 'this month you will be redeemed, they said to him 'how can we be redeemed? God said to Avraham 'thy seed... shall serve them four hundred years' and only two hundred and ten have gone by! Moshe answered them when God desires your redemption He does not look at your calculations<sup>71</sup>*

**Shir Hashirim Rabba, Parsha 2, Sidra Tanina 1:8**

בשעה שבא ואמר לישראל בחדש זה אתם  
נגאלין אמרו לו משה רבינו היאך אנו  
נגאלין והלא אמר הקב"ה לאברהם  
(בראשית ט"ו) ועבדום וענו אותם ארבע  
מאות שנה, ועדיין אין בידינו אלא מאתים  
ועשר שנה, אמר להם הואיל והוא חפץ  
בגאולתכם אינו מביט בחשבונותיכם  
שיר השירים רבה (וילנא) פרשה ב

<sup>70</sup> Also see Jeremiah 7:25-26: "Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt until this day I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, from early in the morning: Yet they did not listen to me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck; they did worse than their fathers"

<sup>71</sup> See as well: Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 8a regarding the original evaluation of King David.

## Second Redemption – Second Temple Period

### Timeframe:

365 BCE- Proclamation of Cyrus; return of the exiles and building of Second Temple begins<sup>72</sup>

165 BCE- Chanukah; Jewish independence and sovereignty<sup>73</sup>

From the beginning of the redemption to its peak took two hundred years.

### Setbacks:

*And the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build (The Temple); And hired counselors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia: And in the reign of Ahasuerus, they wrote to him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem... Then ceased the work on the house of God which is in Jerusalem*

**Ezra 4:4-6**

ויהי עם הארץ מרפידי ידי עם יהודה ומבהלים אותם לבנות: וסכרים עליהם יועצים להפר עצתם כל ימי כורש מלך פרס ועד מלכות דריוש מלך פרס: ובמלכות אחשורוש בתחלת מלכותו כתבו שטנה על ישבי יהודה וירושלם:

**עזרא ד:ד-ו**

These events took place after the return of many Jews from the Babylonian exile in compliance with the charter of Cyrus the Great, allowing the Jews to build the Second Temple.

### Spiritual Level:

*In those days I saw in Judah men treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading them on donkeys; and also wine, grapes, and figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day... Also in those days I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And half their children spoke in the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah.<sup>74</sup>*

**Nehemiah 13: 15, 23-24**

בימים ההמה ראיתי ביהודה דרכים גתות בשבת ומביאים הערמות ועמסים על החמרים ואף יין ענבים ותאנים וכל משא ומביאים ירושלם ביום השבת ... גם בימים ההם ראיתי את היהודים השיבו נשים אשדדיות עמניות מואביות: ובניהם חצי מדבר אשדודית ואינם מכירים לדבר יהודית...

**נחמיה יג: טו, כג-כד**

### Leadership and Expectations:

*Ten genealogical classes went up from Babylon to Israel; Kohanim, Leviim. Yisraelim, disqualified Kohanim, converts, freed slaves, Mamzerim (born from forbidden relationships), Nesinim, Shtukim (whose father is unknown), Asufim (both*

עשרה יוחסים עלו מבבל: כהני, לויי, ישראלי, חללי, גירי, וחרורי, ממזירי, נתיני, שתוקי, ואסופי ... לא עלה עזרא מבבל -

<sup>72</sup> Rashi on Ezra 1:1

<sup>73</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Kriat Megila 1:1

<sup>74</sup> Another example can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Megila 12a "The students asked Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai: why did the Jewish people of that generation deserve extermination? ... because they derived pleasure from the feast of that wicked one Achashverosh... because they prostrated themselves to the golden image in the days of Nebuchadnezzar"

parents are unknown)... Ezra did not go up from Babylonia until he made it like fine sifted flour.

**Kiddushin, 69a-b**

עד שעשאה כסולת נקיה ועלה.  
מסכת קידושין דף סט. – טז:

The majority of Jews at the time did not heed the call of King Cyrus and chose to remain in Babylon. Most of the 42,300 people who did join the movement were the outcasts of Jewish society; those who had little to lose by leaving and everything to gain.

It is evident from these examples that the four arguments presented earlier do not hold true of the known and acknowledged processes of exile and redemption. Therefore they should not limit our interpretation of the events of our times.

What difference does it make whether or not the exile has ended? Is there any religious significance to this question? Shabbat is still Shabbat, kashrut is still kashrut, etc... in what way does religious life change based on the answer to this question? I would like to point to three areas or aspects of religious life which I believe are profoundly impacted by the outcome of this question.

#### **Truth and Historical Perspective.**

First and foremost, is the question of truth itself. The understanding that something fundamental has changed in our communal religious identity changes one's entire perspective on our times, yielding a recognition of God's involvement in the historical developments of our time. It is God's providence that has brought the fulfillment of the words of the prophets regarding the ingathering of the exiles, the return of sovereignty, military success and economic growth. One of the practical implications of this point is the attitude towards Israel Independence Day; is it a civil celebration alone or a religious holiday to be observed with *Hallel* and expression of gratitude to *Hashem*?

#### **Broad and Proactive Halachic Decision Making**

Throughout exile, *halacha* was primarily reactive; dealing with the many internal and external challenges faced by Jewish communities with the primary goal being maintenance of the status quo. A Jewish state raises questions that necessitate a proactive halachic approach. For example, how can the State maintain a modern economy while still observing the laws of *Shmita*? For the first time in 1800 years non-Jews are a minority and Jews a majority. What should be the status of and attitude towards non-Jews in Israel? Given the fact that hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens are not Jews according to halacha, what should be the conversion policies of the State of Israel and the Jewish community?

#### **Attitude Towards the Mundane.**

The understanding that there is once again a Jewish nation-state should translate into a positive attitude towards academic studies, a modern thriving economy, a strong army and a vibrant civic culture. These become not only a necessity for the physical maintenance and success of the state, but part and parcel of a renewed comprehensive Jewish identity. In turn, this should impact such questions as the religious value of army service, the relationship of Torah study with work and academic studies, and the question of relations, cooperation and partnership with non-observant Jews in both the private and public realms.

## Conclusion

The opposing conflicting opinions in the religious community regarding the State of Israel, that which views the state as no more than a mere random historical occurrence and that advocated here, which views the State as a fundamental change in the course of Jewish history, can be compared to the difference between a person's attitude towards purchasing a new appliance and becoming a parent. A refrigerator is an appliance which certainly possesses pragmatic and instrumental value. The historical occurrence of their invention may even spark *halachic* discussion, such as opening the refrigerator door on Shabbat. But by no means does our possession of refrigerators penetrate to our inner religious experience or impact our beliefs. There is no difference between Judaism with a refrigerator and Judaism without a refrigerator. On the other hand, we may view the coming into being of the State of Israel and its significance as similar to that of having a child; not merely a technical addition to our religious lives, but the development of a new facet of our identity that impacts us on the deepest and most profound levels. The birth of a child changes the way in which a parent defines himself. This is how we should relate to the State of Israel, as redefining our religious identity and experience. We are home. We are together. Our fate as a people is in our own hands once again, and we are better able to discover our capabilities and realize our full potential. In this sense the State of Israel is the child of the Jewish people.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize those voices in the Jewish and halachic community that relate to the State of Israel as no more than a mere instrument. Those opinions have value as well; they serve as a constant reminder that though we have come a significant way in the redemptive process, there is still much to amend, to perfect and to strive for.