

An Ancient Echo

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Redemption is an arduous and confusing process. It is arduous because, as history convulses and lurches, our reality is often violently toppled. The turbulence and furor of redemption is reflected in the statement of both Ulla and Rav Yosef (Sanhedrin 98b) “let the redemption arrive but let me be spared from the experience.”

Redemption is confusing because its terms and conditions are hidden and untraceable. Two great visionaries, at two critical historical junctures, each attempted to decode the redemptive riddle. As the first exile began in Egypt, Yaakov attempted to uncover the course of geula and his efforts were thwarted by the Ribono shel Olam:

Yaakov determined to reveal the redemption but the details were concealed from him.

Bereishit Rabbah 96

שבקש יעקב אבינו לגלות את הקץ ונסתם ממנו
בראשית רבה צו

As the second exile unfolded, Daniel, uniquely positioned to track the historical trajectory, sought the same vision. Twice in the book of Daniel, an angel instructs him to seal the details of future Messianic events "until the final chapter of history will arrive and knowledge will increase" (Daniel 12; 4, 9). Without direct prophecy about these events, we are left to our own imagination and the collective yearning of a nation thirsting for its renewal.

Indeed, previous models of geulah serve as precedent for our final redemption, so that we can identify the process once it commences. However, those models only provide general templates rather than precise graphs. The first *geula* from Egypt is referred to as 'ליל שימורים' – a night and an experience 'reserved' for future recurrences. Without question, the liberating events in Egypt will both shape our final geulah and verify its redemptive nature. Yet, as the angel instructed Daniel, the exact details of our geulah remain veiled. We wait! With unswerving faith in one hand and absolute commitment in the other, we wait!

Yet, as we wait, we are haunted by uncertainty. The return to our homeland and the repopulation of our ancestral country has whetted our appetite for full redemption. But we are baffled by so many unanswered questions and so many unyielding enigmas. To so many, these questions are more than nagging mysteries; they seem so unanswerable that the entire process is rejected and Divine authorship denied. If this were clearly the hand of Hashem, it would not be riddled with so many question marks. Undeniably though, even to those who embrace the State of Israel as the start of our redemption, these disquieting questions haunt our consciousness.

Chief among these questions is the secular nature of our redemption. Not only were the great leaders of this renaissance secular, but the very movement was premised on secular principles. To

make matters worse, the values of Secular Zionism were proposed as a *replacement* for traditional religious values. Zionism, in its inception, was never secular in merely an *incidental* manner; it effectively sought to, and, true to its plan, succeeded in, replacing and displacing religion to so many millions of Jews. The State of Israel is primarily a secular organism, generally driven by secular institutions and maintained by a majority which is either completely secular or, at most, traditional in their religious practice. How can this process be deemed redemptive or even Divine?

Understanding this enigma and decoding the mystery of Secular Zionism demands a broader understanding of the general trends of the 19th century, the period so pivotal in hatching the Zionist ideal and jump starting the return to our mother land. The 19th century witnessed the collapsing of conventional or institutional religion. During the previous four centuries, man had succeeded in rising from the suffering and backwardness of the feudal period and repairing the world. The Renaissance restored faith in the human spirit and emancipated human resources which were dormant for millennia. As mankind looked back at the stagnancy and suffering of the past thousand years, one obvious culprit emerged and one force was held responsible for so much persecution. Organized religion was seen as the great criminal of human history, wreaking death and abuse upon humanity. Mankind hurled an accusatory finger at organized religion, and humanity quickly lost interest in a world which was exploited for so long. The fortress of religion began to cave in, leading to our reality of life in the modern secular city; in which religion has either entirely regressed or has been dramatically attenuated.

As organized religion retreated, an intellectual vacuum emerged; mankind no longer looked to religion to provide meaning and direction. Nature abhors a vacuum and the nature of human experience is no different. During the 19th century, many new systems sprouted up to define man's existence. This was the century of the "isms." Marxism, Communism, Darwinism, Socialism, Utilitarianism, Millenarianism, and Imperialism were just the headliners in an endless stream of new ideologies conjured up by the human imagination in the great search for meaning. One may claim that the search goes on and this emptiness has fueled modern angst.

Within the 19th century, the most dominant ideology to emerge as religion was collapsing was nationalism. For the first time in history, man defined himself first by nation and only secondarily by religion. If, for hundreds of years, people introduced themselves as a Catholic who *resided* in Paris or as a Protestant who *resided* in London, modern man introduced himself as a *Frenchman* who happened to be Catholic or an *Englishman* who happened to be Protestant. National identity and affiliation replaced religion and the consequences ricocheted throughout Europe, ultimately exploding in the First World War. The continent was eventually remapped based on the new dynamics of nationhood.

This crisis of organized religion did not spare the Jews of Europe, even and especially those who were presumably most fortified. Enlightenment of man exposed the Jews to the persuasive trends of the era. In stunning fashion, Orthodox Judaism came under a new assault, from within. This century saw the rise of Conservative and then Reform Judaism, a communal earthquake which altered traditional Jewish practice and halachik experience like never before. The Haskalah movement, though providing many welcome opportunities, without question, further

rocked the Jewish reality. As Professor Marc B. Schapiro⁷⁵ noted, in the year 1920 there were more young Jewish men enrolled in Russian universities than in all the yeshivos combined. The 'yeshiva world' was primarily an elitist movement, available to a few thousand boys at best, while most Jewish young men faced overwhelming challenges to their religion. Millions of Jews were faced with historical extinction, lost to Jewish history washed away by the tides of secularization which swept Europe. Religion no longer captured the human imagination and it certainly would not speak to the droves of 'imperiled' Jews.

Amidst this peril, Hakadosh Baruch Hu intervened and evoked a long dormant passion which literally rescued so many of our people from historical extinction. In an era of nationalism, He evoked Jewish nationalism and called it Zionism. From the inception of Jewish history, Hakadosh Baruch Hu had planted, within the Jewish heart, the ability to respond to the call of people, homeland and nation, even if that heart was indifferent or even alien to formal religion and ritual. It was that dormant faith which Hakadosh Baruch Hu awakened and it is the process of Jewish Nationalism of Secular Zionism which has restored so many of our people to the Jewish historical journey.

A careful reading of the conclusion of Parshat Noach reminds us that the first Zionist, the first pilgrim to journey to Israel was not Avraham, as commonly assumed, but his father Terach.

And Terach took his son Avram, and Lot the son of his son Haran, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Avram, and he left with them from Ur Kasdim to journey to the land of Canaan, and they travelled to Charan and settled there.

Bereishit 11:31

ויקה תרה את אברם בנו ואת לוט בן
הרן בן בנו ואת שרי כלתו אשת אברם
בנו ויצאו אתם מאור כשדים ללכת
ארצה כנען ויבאו עד חרן וישבו שם:
בראשית יא:לא

Terach begins the migration but, for some reason, sojourns in Charan and never arrives in Israel. Yet it was his initiative to uproot his family and travel to a land he never encountered. This first traveler to Israel is the same Terach who, according to Chazal, was immersed in the ancient world of paganism. Terach was an idolater who never uncovered the presence of an invisible and monotheistic God. Yet this first Jew was ineluctably drawn to a homeland he never inhabited. He sensed, undoubtedly subconsciously, the call of homeland and the promise of nation.

At the dawn of Jewish history, the Ribono Shel Olam programmed the Jewish heart to respond to national identity even if that heart remains indifferent to religious experience. Hundreds of years prior to revealing His will at Har Sinai and delivering a system of Torah and mitzvot, Hakadosh Baruch Hu challenged Avraham to a historical mission at Har Hamoriah during the Brit Bein Habetarim. He delivered to Avraham a terrifying, but glorious challenge to march through history bearing a message of morality and monotheism, often inciting the wrath of a world unable or unwilling to receive that message. That unique echo of Har Hamoriah reverberates within Jewish hearts even when the call of Har Sinai doesn't resonate. It is an echo which Hakadosh Baruch Hu sounded thousands of years ago and evoked once again at the endpoint of Jewish history as so many Jewish people were faced with historical extinction. The secular call of Jewish Nationalism is a 'safeguard' established to capture those for whom religion would no longer capture their Jewish longing and their Jewish identity.

⁷⁵ Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966

Of course this echo of Jewish Nationalism is only partial. As it lacks the halachik and Torah-based frequency it isn't a complete transmission but only a faintly heard echo. Yet it is a historically irreplaceable transmission. Parshat Re'eh describes the ideal goal of Avodat Hashem.

After the Lord your God shall you follow and fear, and keep His mitzvoth, and hearken to His voice, and worship Him, and cleave to Him.

Devarim 13:5

אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו ואתו תיראו ואת מצותיו תשמרו ובקלו תשמעו ואתו תעבדו ובו תדבקון:

דברים יג:ה

The powerful phrases of this pasuk describe our adherence to mitzvoth, loyalty to God's word, worship and service, and finally a complete encounter with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Yet the initial phrase of 'follow after Hashem' appears to describe a very different and inferior experience. If we seek a complete encounter and absolute loyalty, what meaning exists for merely following?

R' Yehuda b. R' Simon opened "You should follow after your God". Is it possible [for a human being] to follow after God? ... Rather, just as God [after creating his world] immediately planted in [and built] His world, so when you enter the land of Israel begin by planting.

Vayikra Rabbah 25:3

ר"י ב"ר סימון פתח (דברים יג) אחרי ה' אלהיכם תלכו, וכי אפשר לבשר ודם להלוך אחר הקב"ה ... אלא מתחלת ברייתו של עולם לא נתעסק הקב"ה אלא במטע תחלה הה"ד (בראשית ב) ויטע ה' אלהים גן בעדן, אף אתם כשנכנסין לארץ לא תתעסקו אלא במטע תחלה הה"ד כי תבאו אל הארץ.

ויקרא רבה כה:ג

This midrash provides a map for 'following' God or for achieving "*acharei Hashem Elokeichem teileichu*". Is this our ideal? Does a full Jew aspire to walk behind God, merely following Him by example and planting in the land of Israel? After all, don't we aim to stand before him as Avraham did – '*hithalech lifanai vehyei tamim*.' Don't we dream of a more intimate stance of as we were privileged to in the Mikdash? Don't we aspire to stand facing Him, receiving His will, embracing His presence?

Of course, the complete relationship with God is our ideal, but not every Jew, at every point in history, will maintain this ability. Many will have their religion 'beaten out of them' by world events, and still others will have it emptied by the distractions of their world. They will be rendered incapable of '*lifnei Hashem*'. For those Jews, Hakadosh Baruch Hu provides an alternate experience, one which is far less complete but vital in enabling a relationship of '*acharei Hashem*' by planting and building a homeland, by feeling the pulse of a nation, even if they cannot hear the full voice of their God.

There are many great Jews who are passionately dedicated to Israel, though they aren't able to complement that national identity with a religious lifestyle. They may not even be aware that their nationalism is a Divine voice, but they live a life of selfless dedication to our people. To be sure, some are aware of the Divine nature of this call but unable to translate that impulse into Torah and mitzvoth; they sense Shabbat and Jewish festivals, the centrality of Tanach, the generalities of kashruth, but are unable to commit to a lifestyle of comprehensive religious fidelity. Yet others, similar to Terach, aren't even able to associate this call as Divine. They are unable to embrace any halachik system or even any acknowledgement of Hashem. Yet they are pulsing with an ancient Jewish passion, which the Ribono Shel Olam Himself designed. It is

certainly not complete but still Divine. It is a historical calling which has rescued so many religiously disenfranchised Jews from historical irrelevance and has positioned them as active and oftentimes heroic participants in the final chapters of Jewish history. Only Divine wisdom could conceive of a passion so profound and so primal that it compels their participation even though the Divine origin is so indiscernible.

Ilan Ramon z"l, who lost his life in the Discovery accident, in many ways reminded us of everything which is right and proper about Secular Zionism. He flew with an Israeli flag emblazoned on his lapel during a time in which it was not popular to be associated with our homeland or our people. During the Intifada of the early part of the previous decade, we were being assailed for our efforts to defend our people and exterminate terrorism. Showcasing the Israeli flag to an international audience was not the most convenient choice, but it rejuvenated our national spirit when we needed it most. When he flew, he demanded kosher food; he was sensitive to the fact that his flight wasn't personal, but was undertaken on behalf of an entire people. When he flew, he carried lists of Holocaust survivors because he understood that his flight was on behalf of Jewish history and its martyrs and heroes. Though not personally observant, he recited Kiddush on that flight, appreciating the import of this moment for our people and its Shabbat. Finally and perhaps most memorably, he flew with a sefer Torah, and for the first time since the Torah was delivered from heaven it was returned to heaven. Just as it was delivered in a fiery burst, so was it retrieved!

Ilan Ramon z"l represented everything Divine and essential about Secular Zionism. If it weren't for secular Zionism, it would not have been Ilan Ramon aboard the Discovery spaceship with a Kiddush cup, sefer Torah and Holocaust lists. It would have been a Jew, lost to history with a fading picture of an ancient Jewish grandmother upon his wall. But it was Ilan Ramon z"l aboard that spaceship, proudly brimming with Jewish identity, raising the flag of our homeland and the spirit of our people into space!!

The long night of exile has wearied many of our nation. The length of our journey, the endless persecutions and intermittent expulsions have all effaced the Judaism of so many. Many have arrived at the endpoint of Jewish history with their faith intact, mitzvah performance vibrant and Torah study unparalleled. Miraculously, just 70 years after Torah was attacked in Europe and its heroes massacred, there is more Torah being studied than at any point since the first Temple era! This reminds us of the indestructibility and infinity of our Torah and ultimately the supernatural status of our people. Our Torah is not part of this world, and though it may be temporarily impacted by history, it soars above the historical fray. Just as our Torah soars, so do our people, challenged but never defeated by history. Yet so many Jews cannot connect to our Torah and its eternal message. Sadly they aren't able to stand 'lifnei Hashem' in full identification with the entire dual message of our two mountains, Har Sinai and Har Hamoriah. Fortunately though, they still live deep Jewish lives, displaying selfless commitment to our homeland, giving their lives on our behalf, and standing shoulder to shoulder with us as we face a world unwilling to acknowledge the return of a Jew to History. Though they aren't ultimate *ovdei Hashem*, they *are* brothers and partners and are unwittingly driven by a Divine call. Secular Zionism is not some miscarriage of Jewish history. It is the evoking of an ancient Jewish passion, planted in the Jewish Heart by the Ribono Shel Olam and activated at the crucial endpoint in history to help gather and preserve millions for the final moments of our historical journey.