

Geulah: The End of Jewish Fear

Rabbi Pesach Wolicki

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Yesodei HaTorah

On January 16th 1948, not quite two months after the UN vote in favor of a Jewish state, but still almost four months from its eventual establishment, David Ben-Gurion rose to speak. Arab armies were preparing to destroy the as yet undeclared Jewish State. The Jews of Palestine prepared for what looked like an unwinnable military struggle. Ben-Gurion was addressing the Central Committee of MaPai, the most powerful political party and de facto leadership of the Jewish settlement. He spoke about war. He spoke about Jewish history. He spoke about the difficult road that lay ahead and the courage that it would require to succeed.

“War is the ultimate test not only of strength but of the will to live. We now stand, after two thousand years, before this ultimate test... Whoever exercises his will to live to its full extent will pass the test. Whoever’s will fails, will fail... If we have not yet fully dedicated ourselves - with all of our abilities - to the needs of the war, we must certainly do this immediately. If we act before it is too late, if the feelings of a nation that has fought - unlike any other - for its survival for two thousand years do not disappoint, if we do not recoil in fear from the great test as we have not recoiled in fear from many small tests, we will prevail.”

Forty-two years earlier, in 1906, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook published a short collection of essays entitled “*Ikvei HaTzon*.” The third essay – only two pages long – is titled “*HaPachad*” (“The Fear”).

Rav Kook explains the destructive nature of fear:

“The sole source of all weakness and all material, ethical, and intellectual inaction is fear that overextends its boundary. It threatens the person, that he should not do anything for his own salvation, that he should not raise a finger to save himself lest he be harmed... It makes him weak until, out of laziness and inertia, he falls into all evil.”

Fear, Rav Kook explains, paralyzes us. It makes us feel that we are helpless and unable to change our situation for the better. One who is afraid sees neither potential nor hope. One who is afraid can not be free.

Rav Kook bemoans the fact that the Jewish people in the exile have become characterized by fear. The exile caused a nation that is meant to be girded with courage to become concerned only with the temporary hope of refuge from the dangers of the moment.

Fear does not only negatively affect our choices, it narrows our broader understanding of the world as well. *Gevurah*, the absence of fear, is actually a prerequisite for prophecy.

The shekhina rests only upon one who is wise, courageous, and wealthy.

Shabbat 92a

אין השכינה שורה אלא על חכם גבור ועשיר ובעל קומה.

מסכת שבת דף צב.

Either due to lack of insight or due to overwhelming temporal needs, one who lacks these traits is unable to see beyond the concerns of the moment. Such a person is not free to see a long-term picture filled with possibility. Prophecy, the resting of the *shekhina* on a navi, can not coexist with a perspective that is artificially limited by short sighted or temporary concerns.

Gevurah – courage - is by no means an ignorance of danger. On the contrary, one who is unaware of danger cannot possibly display courage. Whereas fear prevents us from actualizing our will due to the perceived dangers, courage is the refusal to allow danger to influence behavior. Courage – the opposite of fear – is taking action when fear, the natural reaction to danger, would prevent us from doing so.

Fear is the opposite of “*gevurah*.” With “*gevurah*” there is possibility, hope, and greatness.

What is true of the individual is true of the nation as a whole. For the *shekhina* to rest upon *Am Yisrael*, for us to realize our true national identity, we must become a nation that is a collective “*chacham, gibor, and ashir*.”

That *gevurah* is a prerequisite for the realization of our national goals is evident from the following two passages in the Torah.

After the *Akeidah*, - the paradigmatic moment of *gevurah* - when Avraham is blessed by God, the Torah states:

“God declares: I have sworn by My own Essence that because you performed this act and did not hold back your only son, I will bless you greatly and increase your offspring like the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore, your offspring shall inherit the gate of their enemies, and all the nations of the world shall be blessed through your descendents since you have obeyed My voice.”

Bereshit 22:16-18

ויאמר בי נשבעתי נאם ה' כי יען אשר עשית את הדבר הזה ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך: כי ברך אברכך והרבה ארבה את זרעך ככוכבי השמים וכחול אשר על שפת הים וירש זרעך את שער איביו: והתברכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ עקב אשר שמעת בקלי: בראשית פרק כב

The first clause, the promise of abundant offspring “like the stars of the sky” has previously been told to Avraham (*Bereshit* 15:5). Similarly, the universalistic vision - “all the nations of the world shall be blessed through your descendents” – is a blessing that Avraham received earlier as well. It is only the second clause, “*your offspring shall inherit the gate of their enemies*,” that is new. The conclusion is both inescapable and historically accurate. *Mesirut nefesh*, the willingness to give up our lives – and the lives of our children – is a prerequisite for the fulfillment of our national goals. If we are unwilling to fight, if we are afraid, we will not succeed in actualizing our identity as a nation.

At the end of the forty years in the desert God commands Moshe and Elazar HaKohen to conduct a census. This command immediately follows the command to attack Midian. The purpose of the census is made clear both by this context as well as the language of God's instruction.

Take a census of the whole community of Yisrael - those twenty years old or more – all who are able to serve in the army of Yisrael.

Bamidbar 26:2

שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל מבן
עשרים שנה ומעלה לבית אבתם כל יצא
צבא בישראל:
במדבר כו:ב

The purpose of the census is clear. Moshe and Elazar are to count the number of fighting men in Israel “*Kol yotzei tzava beYisrael.*”

In the verse that immediately follows its completion a second purpose of this census is revealed.

These are the numbers of the Bnei Yisrael: Six hundred and one thousand, seven hundred and thirty. And God spoke to Moshe saying, ‘To these shall the land be divided as an inheritance according to the number of their names.

Bamidbar 26:51-53

אלה פקודי בני ישראל שש מאות
אלף ואלף שבע מאות ושלושים:
וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר: לאלה
תחלק הארץ בנחלה במספר שמות:
במדבר כו:נא-נג

Moshe is commanded to divide up the land of Israel according to the numbers and names of this census. It seems that God is telling Moshe that this census is to serve an additional purpose, a proverbial killing of two birds with one stone. In addition to counting fighting men, the same census is to be used to divide the land of Israel.

If in fact the census served two purposes, why would God not mention this at the time of the command?

I'd like to suggest that the census, in fact, had only one purpose – the single purpose stated at the time of the command, to count fighting men. As for the question of the division of Eretz Yisrael, the answer is clear. “To **these** shall the Land be divided”. The question, “who are ‘**these**,’ to whom shall the Land be divided?” is answered by looking back at the purpose of the census “*Kol yotzei tzava beYisrael*”. Those who are counted among the fighters of Israel, merit the inheritance of the Land of Israel.

In our day as well, this message holds true. It is through the *mesirut nefesh* of all those who are willing to fight, who are not bound by fear, that we inherit the Land.

God could have given us an empty land for which we would not have to fight. In such a scenario, there would be no struggle, no sacrifice, and no *gevurah*. However, it is only through the *gevurah* of *Am Yisrael*, in our day, that we can begin to realize our true national goals in our Land. This *gevurah* is an essential prerequisite for *hashraat hashekhina*, culminating ultimately in the elevation and perfection of all nations – the true purpose of Jewish nationalism – as stated by God to Avraham after the Akeida: “your offspring shall inherit the gate of their enemies, and all the nations of the world shall be blessed through your descendents since you have obeyed My voice.”

May we embrace God's gift of Jewish strength for which we *daven* every morning. “*Baruch ata Hashem Elokeinu melech ha'olam, ozer Yisrael biGevurah*”.