

The Religious Significance of Israel

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If we treat the phrase “*reishit tzmichat geulateinu*” as granting the state of Israel clear messianic implications, then celebrating “Yom Haatzmaut” as a religious holiday follows automatically. I believe that we should celebrate the birth of Israel without introducing any messianic motif.² This emerges from an analysis of the transformational impact Israel’s existence has had on Jewish life and religious observance.

In the ebb and flow of Jewish history we have experienced times of joy and moments of sorrow. In the Torah, critical events became incorporated into the Jewish calendar as holidays. Chazal added Purim and Chanukah. After the destruction of the second temple, which was mourned through observing the pre-existing fast of Tisha B’Av, there has been a reluctance to add new commemorative days to the calendar. This has led to a lack of clarity in halakhic responses to the creating of the state of Israel and the return of the Jewish people to our homeland after almost nineteen hundred years of exile.

The debate about saying full, half, or no hallel, caused us to lose focus on the enormous significance of what has transpired. Sixty-two years later, Israel has become the largest Jewish community in the world and its Jewish population is approaching being a majority of world Jewry. It has become clarified that the emergence of the state is a transforming event. The trajectory of Jewish history has radically shifted.

Serious challenges remain, and at times, frustrations with mistakes by a particular government can lead to losing sight of the fundamental change. Grandiose expectations of immediate redemption have led some to become disillusioned. The Zionist vision, when translated to a reality, failed to resolve the Jewish problem. The State of Israel has not proven to be a panacea. We need to remind ourselves that the generation of Jews freed from Egypt did not merit entering the land of Israel because of their inadequacies. Ezra and Nehemiah were unable to convince the overwhelming majority of the Jews in Babylonia to return to the land of Israel.

The greatest believers in the State did not even dream that more than a million Jews from the former Soviet Union would become Israeli citizens. Few knew that there were Jews in Ethiopia.

¹ This paper is a revision of an article that I wrote in Jewish Action on the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel.

²The messianic and non-messianic approaches to religious Zionism are associated with the thought of Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik respectively.

The ingathering of the exiles may be incomplete but that primarily reflects the reluctance of American Jewry to make aliya. The Diaspora still exists but it is increasingly dependent on Israel for sustenance. Only in the United States is there a comparable number of Jews. However, if we trace the trajectory, the number of American Jews has barely increased in sixty years while the Jewish population in Israel has gone from six hundred and fifty thousand to more than six million.

The number of Jews learning Torah full time in Israel dwarfs the numbers in Europe before the Second World War. Without the support of secular governments this community could not survive economically. The period of Torah study for American yeshiva students, girls as well as boys, includes at least a year in Israel. In countries with a small Jewish population the rabbis and teachers are often shlichim from Israel.

Orthodox opposition to Israel is no longer significant. With the exception of the minuscule Neturei Karta, it has been reduced to opposing symbols of the State but supporting it as a reality. Ideological anti-Zionism which was dominant among Reform Jewry, is now a fringe phenomenon. The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which represents a broad spectrum of organizations, stands firmly in supporting Israel and combating all threats to its security.

Even with the wide diversity of American Jewry, the primary Jewish issue for American Jews is where the candidates stand on Israel and its security needs. When all the major candidates express support for Israel the Jewish community searches for any sign that the support is not absolute. If anything, the organized Jewish community is to the right of the Israeli government.

The Birthright program, which offers eight days in Israel to college students, is proving to be a most successful approach for connecting unaffiliated Jews to their Jewish identity. Planned follow-up programs will involve spending significantly more time in Israel. Israel is an assumed component of a Jewish identity.

Speculation about alternative realities is rarely productive. However, we should remember the precarious state of Jewish life after the Holocaust. Many stories have appeared about prominent Americans, who are actually Jewish, but whose parents decided after the Second World War that that they should abandon their identity. They thought that this would protect their children and give them a better chance of having a good life. Pride in being Jewish began to reappear in 1948 when Israel was established.

The wondrous victory of the Six Day War, with the return to Jewish control of the Temple Mount, had enormous impact on Jewish life throughout the world. Those of us who recall the fear of catastrophe felt prior to the war retain the sense of awe at the miraculous reversal. We experienced Hashem's salvation in the proverbial blinking of an eye. Over forty years later the picture is no longer clear. It has become necessary to regain perspective on what has been achieved.

The up and down experiences of Jewish history, with the black cloud of the Holocaust imbedded in our collective memory, has made the Jewish people nervous. Lacking prophets to assure us,

we worry about the fragility of the Jewish state. Concerns lead to vigilance but fears may lead to losing sight of how much has been accomplished.

Israel is a viable state capable of defending itself from its many enemies. Without a true peace it has grown exponentially with a flourishing economy. While the internal conflicts within Jewry have not disappeared, it is far better to debate while having a Jewish country how to best define the nature of being a Jew, rather than whether it would be preferable not to be Jewish at all.

For religious Jews, the new reality creates great opportunities as well as challenges. The existence and financial support of the state has helped enable observance to flourish. This has often come with greater hostility from segments of the secular community. This is not a healthy situation for the Jewish people however one assigns blame for the dispute.

We did not settle in Israel in sufficient numbers to play a major role in the founding of the state. The religious parties have, at best, been junior partners in coalition governments. It is not clear whether legislation is the effective way to preserve the Jewish character of the state. A minority attempting to limit the behavior of the majority creates resentment.

Orthodox Jewry in Israel is split into many factions. Many elements oppose army service. The question whether our focus should be in assuring that society maintains a basic level of public observance or whether we should work to protect the full rights of observant Jews has yet to be answered. What level of kashrut are we willing to sacrifice in order that the entire Israeli army keeps kosher?

Our rabbinical leaders have yet to demonstrate that a modern state can function while observing halakha. Great progress has been made in dealing with modern technology and medicine. In other areas less has been accomplished.

Different proposals have been made for balancing public observance of Judaism with maintaining individual choice. No consensus yet exists for the appropriate parameters but efforts continue. Our present inability to maximize the opportunity for a deeper Jewish identity for all Jews does not negate the religious value of having our own state.

Much has been written about governmental mistakes and wrong policies. Let us not forget the lessons of Jewish history that great moments were invariably followed by disappointments. As a people, the creation of the state of Israel has redefined the contours of our history. As religious Jews, observant life has been expanded and Torah learning has exploded. The secular, traditional and observant, whether Sefardi or Ashkenazi, Chassidim or Misnagdim, religious Zionist or Haredi, all have a joint responsibility to maintain a united people.

Without a state perhaps each group could function in isolation assuming that the Arab government would leave the Jewish community alone. It is absurd to prefer that option because difficult choices have to be made. After sixty-two years we should bless Hashem for giving us the state of Israel with all the complications that come with being responsible for our own destiny.