

The Roots of the Disputes over *Yom HaAtzmaut*

Rabbi David Pri-Chen

Kollel Fellow, YU-Torah Mitzion Chicago Community Kollel

לע"נ סבי ר' דוד ב"ר זאב פרי-חן

גלב"ע יום-העצמאות ה'תשל"ז

Kibutz Galuyot - Ingathering of Exiles

Yom HaAtzmaut is intended to be a day of thanks and jubilation, one that transcends boundaries, for all of world Jewry. After all is said and done and beyond all the intricate analysis regarding the relationship between Zionism and Judaism, the religious significance of the State, the nature of the redemption and other issues, this day marks the occurrence of one of the most meaningful days in the history of our nation. It is an event that, without any dispute, constitutes sufficient reason to be established as a national holiday. The significance of the day goes beyond the mere announcement of a State, the establishment of Tzahal, and other events connected to this day, which may not be sufficient reasons for many parts of our people to establish a holiday. The opening of the gates of the Land of Israel to Jewish *aliyah* on a mass scale and the ingathering of the exiles that began on this day are singular events in history, which undoubtedly have much religious significance. We have never seen a comparable moment in history where Jews scattered in all corners of the earth left their lands and immigrated to G-d's chosen land; and all with the endorsement of the U.N., the institution created to represent the consensus of the nations of the world. It would seem that this alone would warrant the establishment of a day of thanks and praise, whether or not it is the beginning of the final redemption.

Interestingly, the source from which we derive the *halachic* obligation for an individual person to give thanks in response to the occurrence of miracles lies in the context of national ingathering of exiles⁴¹. Tehillim 107 begins as follows:

Give thanks to God, for He is good, for His mercy endures for ever. So let the redeemed of Hashem say, whom He has redeemed from adversity and gathered them out of the lands, from the east

ה' דו לה' פי טוב פי לעולם חסדו:
י' אמרו גאולי ה' אשר גאלם מיד
צ'ר: ומארכות קבצם ממזרח
וממערב מצפון ומימם: תעו

⁴¹:ברכות נ"ד:

and from the west, from the north and from the sea. They wandered in the wilderness in a desert way; they found no city of habitation. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried unto God in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them by a straight way, to go to a city of habitation. Let them give thanks to God for His mercy, and for His wonders to mankind.

Tehillim Perek 107

בְּמִדְבָּר בִּישִׁימוֹן דָּרַךְ עִיר מוֹשָׁב
 לֹא מְצָאוּ: רָעִיבִים גַּם צָמְאִים
 נַפְשָׁם בָּהֶם תִּתְעַטֵּף: וַיִּצְעֲקוּ אֶל
 ה' בְּצָר לָהֶם מִמְצִיאוֹתֵיהֶם יִצִּילֵם:
 וַיְנַדְרִיכֵם בְּדֶרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל לְלֶקֶת אֶל
 עִיר מוֹשָׁב: יוֹדוּ לַה' חֲסֵדוֹ
 וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבְנֵי אָדָם:
 תְּהִלִּים פָּרַק קוּ

The fundamental event from which we learn the obligation to give thanks is derived from precisely the event with which we are concerned. The *pesukim* speak about the ingathering of the exiles from the farthest reaches of the earth. From a *halachic* perspective, this event serves as the archetype for miraculous events in general.

How then is it possible that despite the great miracles that undoubtedly occurred on this day, impacting wide parts of the Jewish world, *Yom HaAtzmaut* became a day that is so associated with conflict, and so saturated with the tensions that exist between the different factions amongst the Jewish religious public?

Yom HaAtzmaut !?

The major reason to this controversy, just like many historical phenomena is that one may offer various, wide ranging interpretations for this event. Perhaps a modest insight to shed light on the tension that surrounds this day will actually illustrate that is part of its unique essence. In other words, the heated debate and spirited discussion about this day may be an inextricable part of *Yom HaAtzmaut* and the time in which we live.

At first glance, it seems that the notion of independence is clearly a foreign notion to Judaism. Independence as it is commonly understood is impossible in our religious worldview, one which is based on our continuous dependence on *Hashem*, Who “recreates in his kindness daily, constantly.”⁴² Yet, people are given free will and have the option of acting contrary to the will of *Hashem*. Man has the capacity to build and create or destroy and tear down, yet man can never shake loose from his constant dependence on his Creator. Seemingly, a declaration of independence flies in the face of our consistent reliance on *Hashem*. Is there a concept of Jewish independence, and if so, what is its nature?

עצמיות and עצמאות

Firstly, in order to understand Jewish independence, let us find the source of the word *Atzmaut* - independence, in the *Tanach*. In its current form the word does not appear in any of the twenty four books of the *Tanach*, but an interestingly similar word is found in several places- *Atzmiut* or *Atzmi*:

My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and figured in the lowest parts of the earth.

Tehillim 139:15

לֹא נִכְחַד עֲצָמִי מִמֶּנִּי אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי בְּסֶתֶר
 רִקְמֹתַי בְּתַחְתּוֹת אָרֶץ:
 תְּהִלִּים קִלְט:טו

⁴² *Birkot Kriat Shema*

The author of this psalm sings to *Hashem*, acknowledging that even his most hidden parts are not hidden from Him. From the moment of creation of an embryo, although it occurs in a hidden place, it is all revealed before the Master of the world. Some commentators explain that the word *atzmi* in this verse refers to the fetus and it relates to the bone (from the word *etzem*). In contrast, the author of the *Metzudos* commentary suggests that the word connotes the essence of the matter in its qualities, an interpretation closer to today's usage of that word. However, even when we accept the first interpretation, referring the word *atzmi* to *etzem*, the bones of the fetus, his intent is to the basic elements and perhaps the most inner component of the person's personality. Just as the skeleton of the person is the basis of the human being, as it holds up and gives shape to the entire being, so too, *atzmi* is the hidden aspect of the person that gives form and shape to one's personality.

“As a person is a tree of the field.”⁴³ Often, the Torah draws a comparison between the physical structure of a person and trees of the field, or to the world of flora at large. A person has seeds, much like a tree; one's children are one's saplings:

Your wife shall be as a fruitful vine, in the innermost parts of your house; your children like olive plants, around your table.
Tehillim 128:3

אֲשֶׁתְּךָ כְּגִפְנֵי פִּרְיָהּ בְּיִרְכַּתִּי בֵּיתְךָ
 בְּנֵיךָ כְּשֵׁתְלֵי זַיִתִּים סְבִיב לְשֻׁלְחָנְךָ
 תְּהִלִּים קָכַח: ג

In light of this comparison, etymologists offer that the word *etzem* is related to the word *etz*, tree. People have branches, fruit and leaves but the *etzem*, the essence, is the tree itself. If so, we can continue this analogy and suggest that just as trees, although they are hard and strong, continuously grow and develop, so too do human bones:

And you shall see and your hearts shall gladden, and your bones shall blossom like fields.
Yeshayahu 66:14

וּרְאִיתֶם וְשִׂשׁ לְבַבְכֶם וְנִעְצְמוּתֵיכֶם כְּדֶשֶׁא
 תִּפְרְחֶנָּה וְכוּ'
 יִשְׁעִיהוּ סו: יד

Perhaps this is the basis for the *Ibn Ezra's* explanation of the word *atzmi* in the psalm, which states that this refers to the innate capabilities of the embryo when it is still unborn, the potential that is found within the child that develops and grows over the years.

Hence, the notion of *atzmiut ha'adam* reflects the basic potential within a person. On one hand it is hidden but on the other hand it is the backbone and foundation that exists and develops on the outside. The *atzmiut* is the source of energy and potential which is found in the person, which grows and develops with him.

Likewise, we suggest that the *atzmaut* of the Jewish people is also its *atzmiut*.

Between freedom and *Atzmiut*

After more than 200 years of slavery, *Am Yisrael* finally leaves Egypt as a free and united nation. On the one hand, the Exodus from Egypt marks the end of a long process, the process of

⁴³ *Dvarim 20:19*

transforming a **family** to a **nation**. However, at the same time it also serves as a starting point for a long and arduous journey.

Our sages in the Midrash⁴⁴ compare the Exodus to an antedated birth of an animal. Like a veterinary surgeon, *Hashem* pulls the fetus, *Am Yisrael*, out of the animal uterus. According to this description, it seems that our sages viewed the Egyptian exile as a prolonged pregnancy, the process of forming the nation. Just like an embryo, the growth process of the nation occurs in an exponential fashion: Starting from twelve sons, going through seventy people who went down to Egypt. We find out in the beginning of *Sefer Shmot* that *Bnei Yisrael* became a huge nation, threatening the world's strongest empire at the time. During this stage, *Bnei Yisrael* do not have their own identity yet, and are still a part of the Egyptian culture – similar to the opinion quoted in the *Gemara* that considers the fetus an integral part of his mother (*Yevamot* 78:1). In fact, the first to realize that a separate entity is being created in Egypt, are not *Bnei Yisrael* themselves, but rather the 'animal', or the surrogate mother - the Egyptians. Pharaoh is the first one to define the family of Yaakov as a 'nation':

And he said "behold, the Jewish nation is greater and more powerful than us"
Shemot 1:9

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל עֲמוֹ הַזֶּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב
 וְעָצוּם מִמֶּנּוּ
שְׁמוֹת א:ט

The bloods of the *Korban Pesach* and the *Brit Milah* represent the blood of the labor:

And when I passed over you, and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: By your blood, live; and I said to you: By your blood, live
Yechezkel 16:6

וַאֲעֵבֶר עָלֶיךָ וְאָרַאךָ מְתַבּוֹסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶיךָ וְאָמַרְתִּי לְךָ בְּדַמֶיךָ חַיִּי
 וְלֹא אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ בְּדַמֶיךָ חַיִּי
יחזקאל טז:ו

The Exodus, then, constitutes the final stage of the birth process of *Am Yisrael*.

The Exodus, however, is not the end of the story, rather the beginning of a different journey, the point where the newborn starts its life. This journey begins in *Parashat Beshalach*:

And when Pharaoh had let the people go, and God led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said: 'Lest the people repent when they see war, and they shall return to Egypt.'
Shemot 13:17

וַיְהִי בְשַׁלַּח פְּרַעֲהָ אֶת הָעָם וְלֹא נָחַם
 אֱלֹהִים הַיָּם דֶּרֶךְ אֲרָץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא
 כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פֶּן יִנָּחַם הָעָם בְּרֹאֵתָם
 מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִם:
שְׁמוֹת יג:יז

In the early days of the journey to the land of Israel, God guides the nation through the barren desert and not through the main road. Seemingly, in order to prevent any feelings of regret from the newly freed slaves, God seeks to hide any risk of war from *Am Yisrael*. According to this explanation, the divine plan was to grant some rest to the slaves who were enslaved for so many years, at least for a few days. *Ramban* on those verses has already pointed out the difficulty in this explanation: If so, why did *Hashem* confront *Am Yisrael* with the Egyptians so close to their

מדרש תהלים, מזמור קי"ד⁴⁴

departure? Furthermore: this plan was soon disrupted by the war against *Amalek*! If the purpose of marching through the desert was to avoid war immediately after leaving Egypt, this goal was not achieved, when *Am Yisrael* still had to fight for its life! Moreover: later in the book, we read that *Am Yisrael* wished to return to Egypt because of the wars and perhaps even more because of the hard life in the desert. Was it not better then to guide the people through the shorter route and thus avoid the physical hardships?!

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun⁴⁵ explains, in line with *Rashbam's* approach⁴⁶, that the divine purpose of the guidance through the desert was different than what was previously suggested. R' Bin-Nun claims that in order to understand God's intent in this act, one needs to understand the concerns about the risk of return to Egypt.

Only he shall not have too many horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt for more horses; as God said to you: You shall no longer return that way.

Devarim 17:16

רק ל' א ירבה לו סוסים ול' א ישיב את העם
ממצרימה למען הרבות סוס ויה' אמר לכם ל' א
ת' ספון לשוב בדרך הזה עוד
דברים יז:טז

Throughout the *Tanach* various examples seem to reveal a deeper meaning of the prohibition on the king of Israel to allow the return of *Am Yisrael* to Egypt. *Hashem* does not forbid only the physical return to the land of Egypt, but in addition prohibits a development of a political and security dependence on the southern kingdom. Many prophets criticize the kings of Israel and Judah for relying on the military strength of Egypt. Isaiah contrasts the reliance on Egypt to having faith in *Hashem*:

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help, and rely on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many, and in horsemen, because they are exceeding mighty; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, and don't seek God.

Yeshayahu 31:1

הוי הי רדים מצרים לעזרה על סוסים
ישענו ויבטחו על רכב פי רב ועל
פראשים פי עצמו מא' ד ול' א שעו על
קדוש ישראל ואת ה' ל' א דרשו:
ישעיהו לא:א

God commands the king not to concede the independence of the Jewish people, to avoid bringing about the patronage of Egypt over the Jewish People. The goal of the long haul in the desert is the development of this independence and the non-dependence on Egypt. God does not lead *Am Yisrael* to Israel via the shortest route, but in an indirect, winding route to stress the complete separation from the Egyptian authority. By leading his people straight to the inevitable encounter with their former oppressors, God emphasize that they are redeemed thanks to his own mighty hand, and not by virtue of the consent of Pharaoh. At the end of the grueling journey through the desert, a journey which was designated to create independence and even more so *atzmiut* for the people of Israel, they arrive at the Promised Land. With all the foreseeable difficulties involved in conquering the land they do not turn to Egypt for help. The *atzmiut* is being created during the long process in which *Am Yisrael* receives the Torah, the unique substance of the nation, and starts to fight all alone without any visible miracles by God.

⁴⁵43-39 עמ' (א) תמוז תשנ"א

⁴⁶ R. Shmuel Ben Meir (1080-1160) , שמות יג יז

On *Pesach*, *Am Yisrael* gains its freedom, which means lack of dependence on Egypt, but this is only a negative content. In their wanderings in the desert, the nation achieves its *atzmiut*, the positive self content.

The repentance process of *Am Yisrael*

In the long years of exile, *Am Yisrael* lost its independence as well as their *atzmiut*. For centuries we were not dependent on our own actions, but on the whims of emperors and czars, kings, prime ministers and Führers.

The liberation from this dependence is the first level of *Yom HaAtzmaut* - freedom and lack of dependence on others, but it is only the 'negative' meaning of the day.

The more profound and significant event which happened on this day, was the opportunity given to us by G-d to take our fate in our hands. *Am Yisrael* has the ability to create a reality in which not only they do not depend on others, but they also determine their very own destiny. By the return of *Am Yisrael* to its land, a long process of rediscovery begins, a process of revealing their *atzmiut* and their own substance. *Atzmiut* can be expressed in various aspects of the nation's life - its culture, political choices and many more aspects.

The 5th of Iyar is not only a celebration of Independence and lack of dependence, but mostly ***Yom HaAtzmiut***. On that day *Am Yisrael* returns to its self-essence, and its personalized and unique substance.

At this point let us return to our starting point. It seems that all the discussions and debates within *Am Yisrael* about the essence of *Yom HaAtzmaut* are an integral part of the celebration. The nature of these disputes is perhaps the nation's attempts to find out what is this *atzmiut*, what is the unique essence of the people of Israel. The arguments over the meaning of *Yom HaAtzmaut* are themselves a very powerful expression of Israel's independence. As mentioned above this *atzmiut* is not static and those discussions demonstrate that we even have the mandate to figure out our own self-definition.

Thus explains Rav Kook the essence of *teshuva*, repentance:

Teshuva is a return to the basics, to the beginning, to connect all the leaves of life to the root that they come from.

Orot Hateshuva p. 134

התשובה היא שיבה אל המקורות, אל הראשית,
לחבר את כל ענפי החיים אל השורש אשר משם
הם יוצאים
אורות התשובה עמ' קל"ד

Yom HaAtzmaut for the *klal*, the public, is analogous to what *Yom Kippur* is for the individual. During *Yom Kippur* the individual tries to remove his external layers and to return to his deeper self, so on *Yom HaAtzmaut* - *HaAtzmiut* the *klal* returns to its uniqueness and originality. The tension and debates which surround this day are mere an implication to this repentance.