

Celebrating a Complex Reality¹

Rabbi Reuven Brand

Rosh Kollel, Yeshiva University Torah MiTzion Kollel of Chicago

A Phenomenon

Despite more than six decades and an abundance of halachic discussion and responsa, a peculiar phenomenon remains regarding the observance of Yom Haatzmaut: its liturgy. A simple, anecdotal survey will reveal a wide range of divergent practices within the Torah community: those who do not recite Hallel in the morning, those who recite it even at night with a bracha, those who recite *Tachanun*, those who add sections of Tehillim ordinarily recited at *Kabbalat Shabbat* (Friday night services), and shofar blowing. Even within the Religious Zionist community, practices vary from community to community, with some liturgical prescriptions resulting in what could be seen as a cacophonous medley of biblical and rabbinic holiday prayers. While specific practices are unquestionably the result of halachic discussion,² especially with regard to the recitation of Hallel, this overall reality should give us pause. This divergence may simply be the result of multiple halachic viewpoints and inadequate time for collective practice to coalesce. However, it can be understood as manifesting a profound spiritual reality. Perhaps this ambiguity reflects a Torah view of the complex reality of the founding and standing of the State of Israel- an idea that has precedents in Jewish history.

A Precedent: Communal

The destruction of the Beit Hamikdash by the Babylonian Empire dealt an unprecedented, crushing blow to the Jewish people. It wrought a deep spiritual crisis of faith, in addition to the accompanying political, material and physical hardships. When Coresh, the Persian king, allowed the resettlement of Israel and the construction of a new Beit Hamikdash, it was obviously a great cause for celebration. Yet the book of Ezra describes the mixed reaction of those who assembled in Yerushalayim for the inauguration of the new Beit Hamikdash:

And they sang aloud with praise and with thanks to the Lord for it is good, for His kindness is eternal over Israel, and the entire people

וַיִּעֲנוּ בְהַלֵּל וּבְהוֹדוֹת לַיהוָה, כִּי טוֹב -
כִּי-לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ, עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל;
וְכָל-הָעָם הֲרִיעוּ תְרוּעָה גְדוֹלָה

¹ I would like to thank *Avi Mori*, Mr. Etzion Brand, for his help with the article.

² For a discussion in English of the halachic issues regarding the Tefillot of Yom Haatzmaut, see articles by Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz and Rabbi Dr. Solomon Rybak in the *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, volume VII. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's opinion regarding the liturgy of Yom Haatzmaut is discussed in a letter published in *Covenant, Community and Commitment*, pp. 123-124.

shouted with a great shout with praise to the Lord because the foundation of the House of the Lord was laid. And many of the priests and the Levites and the heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first Temple when its foundation was laid, [when they saw] this Temple with their eyes, were weeping with a loud voice, and many with a shout of joy to raise [their] voice. And the people did not recognize the voice of the shout of joy because of the voice of the people's weeping, for the people were shouting a great shout, and the voice was heard from afar.

Ezra 3:11-13 (Judaica Press Translation)

בְּהִלָּל, לַה', עַל, הוֹסֵד בֵּית-ה'.
 יְבוֹרְבִים מִהַפְּתָנִים וְהַלְוִיִּם וְרֵאשֵׁי
 הָאָבוֹת הַזְּקֵנִים, אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ אֶת-
 הַבַּיִת הָרִאשׁוֹן בְּיָסְדוֹ--וְזֶה הַבַּיִת
 בְּעֵינֵיהֶם, בְּכִים בְּקוֹל גָּדוֹל;
 וְרַבִּים בְּתְרוּעָה בְּשִׂמְחָה, לְהַרִים
 קוֹל. יַג וְאִין הָעָם, מִכִּירִים קוֹל
 תְּרוּעַת הַשִּׂמְחָה, לְקוֹל, בְּכִי הָעָם:
 כִּי הָעָם, מְרִיעִים תְּרוּעָה גְדוֹלָה,
 וְהַקוֹל נִשְׁמַע, עַד-לְמִרְחֹק.
עזרא ג:יא-יג

Perhaps the disappointment of the old timers can be explained by the Gemara (Yoma 21b), which enumerates several features of this new house of Hashem that were missing:

These are the five differences between the First Temple and the Second Temple: The Ark; the Covering; The Chreubs; the fire, Divine presence and Divine inspiration; the Urim v'Tumim.

אלו חמשה דברים שהיו בין מקדש ראשון למקדש שני ואלו הן ארון וכפורת וכרובים אש ושכינה ורוח הקודש ואורים ותומים.

Hence, despite its significant spiritual achievement, the second Beit Hamikdash was fraught with complexity, a reality mirrored in the people's initial reaction.

Furthermore, even after the Beit Hamikdash had been rebuilt, many Jews continued to live in exile. They even wondered whether they should still continue to observe Tisha Bav once the new Beit Hamikdash had been established:

And Sharezer and Regem Melech and his men sent to Bethel to pray before the Lord, to say to the Priests of the house of the Lord of Hosts and to the prophets, saying, "Shall I weep in the fifth month (i.e. on the ninth of Av), abstaining as I have done these many years?"

Zechariah 7:2-3 (Judaica Press Translation)

וַיִּשְׁלַח בֵּית אֵל שְׂרָאָצָר וְרִגְם מְלֹךְ
 וְאַנְשָׁיו לְחַלּוֹת אֶת פְּנֵי ה'. לֵאמֹר אֵל
 הַכֹּהֲנִים אֲשֶׁר לְבֵית יְהוָה צָבָאוֹת וְאֵל
 הַנְּבִיאִים לֵאמֹר הֲאֵבָכָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי
 הַזֶּה פֶּאֶשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי זֶה כַּמָּה שָׁנִים.
זכריה ז:ב-ג

We learn that even the construction of the Beit Hamikdash itself, built under the specific direction of prophets of Hashem, was viewed with ambiguity by many due to unfulfilled spiritual expectations.

A Precedent: Individual

This notion of complexity can be further enlightened by a Talmudic passage regarding a historic, great spiritual leader, Chizkiyahu, king of Yehuda:

The Holy One Blessed be He wished to appoint Chizkiyahu as the Messiah and Sancheriv as Gog and Magog. The Attribute of Justice said before The Holy One Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, you did not appoint as Messiah David, king of Israel, who recited before you many songs and praises and you are going to appoint as Messiah King Chizkiyahu for whom You

ביקש הקב"ה לעשות חזקיהו משיח וסנחריב גוג ומגוג אמרה מדת הדין לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע ומה דוד מלך ישראל שאמר כמה שירות ותשבחות לפניך לא עשיתו משיח חזקיהו שעשית לו כל הנסים הללו ולא אמר

performed all of these miracles and he didn't recite before you any praises or songs ... At that moment, the earth opened up and said: Master of the Universe, I will recite song before You instead of this righteous individual. Appoint him as Messiah.

Sanhedrin 94a

שירה לפניך תעשהו משיח ... מיד
פתחה הארץ ואמרה לפניו רבש"ע
אני אומרת לפניך שירה תחת צדיק
זה ועשהו משיח פתחה ואמרה שירה
לפניו.

סנהדרין צד.

The question is glaring: why did Chizkiyahu, the righteous king, not sing a song of praise? The Maharal (Rabbi Yehuda Loew, c. 1520- 1609, Prague) suggests that it wasn't Chizkiyahu's lack of will or interest that precluded him from singing a song to Hashem, and his disqualification as Mashiach was not a punishment. He simply couldn't do so because of a lacuna in his generation:

And it's not the explanation that he did not want to sing a song, for it is not so. Rather, that there were those in the generation who knew they were not worthy of singing a song.

Netzach Yisrael, Chapter 43

ואין הפי' שלא רצה לומר שירה שאין
הדבר כך רק היו באותו דור יודעים שאין
ראויים לומר שירה.
נצח ישראל, פרק מג

Perhaps we can expand the idea of the Maharal and suggest that Chizkiyahu could not burst forth with a song of joy because of the complexity of the reality which he faced. For just beyond the corpses of the Assyrian hordes, whom Hashem had killed miraculously, lay the utter destruction and exile of the entire land and people of Israel. Maybe this great king could not raise his voice in song after seeing the entire empire of Torah study and observance that he had built and nurtured from Dan to Beer Sheva reduced to ruins. From the perspective of history, Chizkiyahu is considered one of our greatest leaders and Torah giants; not singing Shira and becoming the Moshiach can be viewed as a natural consequence of his complex circumstance, perhaps not even a shortcoming.

A Complex Reality

In light of these precedents we can understand why the establishment and development of the State of Israel has engendered a complex response from the Torah world. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Hakohen Kook (1891- 1982, Israel) once described his emotions upon hearing the news of the partition plan in 1947 that would shape the contours of a future Jewish state. On the eve of the Six-Day War, in what has become one of the most famous public discourses of this iconic Religious Zionist Torah giant, Rav Zvi Yehuda told his listeners:³

Nineteen years ago, on the night when news of the United Nations decision in favor of the Reestablishment of the State of Israel reached us, when the People streamed into the streets to celebrate and rejoice, I could not go out and join in the jubilation. I sat alone and silent; a burden lay upon me. During those first hours I could not resign myself to what had been done. I could not accept the fact that indeed "they have . . . divided My land." (Joel 4:2)! Yes [and now after 19 years] where is our Hebron—have we

לפני י"ט שנה, באותו לילה מפורסם, בהגיע
ארצה החלטתם החיובית של מושלי אומות-
העולם לתקומת מדינת ישראל, כשכל העם
נהר לחוצות לחוג ברבים את רגשי שמחתו
לא יכולתי לצאת ולהצטרף לשמחה. ישבתי
בדד ואדום כי נטל עלי. באותן שעות
ראשונות לא יכולתי להשלים עם הנעשה,
עם אותה בשורה נוראה, כי אכן נתקיים דבר
ד' בנבואה בתרי-עשר - "ואת ארצי חילקו!"

³ The speech appears in *Go'el Yisrael* pp. 297-298.

forgotten her?! Where is our Shechem, our Jericho, where?! Have we forgotten them?! And all that lies beyond the Jordan—each and every clod of earth, every region, hill, valley, every plot of land, that is part of Eretz Israel—have we the right to give up even one grain of the Land of G-d?! On that night, 19 years ago, during those hours, as I sat trembling in every limb of my body, wounded, cut, torn to pieces—I could not then rejoice.

The next day HaGaon HaRav Y. M. Harlapp zt"l came to our house—he felt the need to come and how could he not come?! We sat together, the two of us, in that small hallowed room in "Beit HaRav" [the room that had been the study of HaRav Zvi Yehudah's father, HaRav Avraham HaCohen Kook]—where else if not there—we sat shocked and silent. Finally, regaining our strength, we said, the two of us as one: "This is the L-rd's doing;/It is marvelous in our eyes." (translation: mercazarav.org)

איפה חברון שלנו - אנחנו שוכחים את זה?!
 ואיפה שכם שלנו - אנחנו שוכחים את זה?!
 ואיפה יריחו שלנו - אנחנו שוכחים את זה?!
 ואיפה עבר הירדן שלנו?! איפה כל רגב
 ורגב? כל חלק וחלק, של ארבע אמות של
 ארץ ד'?! הבידינו לוותר על איזה מילימטר
 מהן? חלילה וחס ושלום!
 באותו מצב מזועזע בכל גופי, פצוע כולי
 וחתוך לגזרים - לא יכולתי אז לשמוח. כך
 היה המצב לפני י"ט שנים, באותו לילה
 ובאותן שעות. למחרת בא אל ביתנו איש
 ברית קדשנו, הגאון רבי יעקב משה הרל"פ
 זצ"ל - היה לו צורך לבוא וכלום יתכן שלא
 היה בא?! התייחדנו אז שנינו, רגעים
 אחדים, באותו חדר קטן ומקודש שב"בית
 הרב" - ולאן יבוא אז אם לא לשם?!
 מזועזעים ישבנו ודמומים. לבסוף התאוששנו
 ואמרנו שנינו כאחד: "מאת ד' הייתה זאת,
 היא נפלאה בעינינו".

Rav Zvi Yehuda's ambivalence was an expression of the complexity of the situation: it was an achievement but not the fullest expression for which he had dreamed.

From a different vantage point, with different concerns, Rav Aharon Kotler⁴ (1891- 1962, Lithuania, United States) expressed similar disappointment at the founding of the State in a parable: Two people lived during the time of the destruction of the Second Temple. The first was a farmer who lived far away from Jerusalem. The Romans came, torched his farm and expelled him from the country. Years later, the Romans allowed him to come back and even helped him restore his farm. This farmer was truly happy about the new situation. A second person lived in Jerusalem before the destruction of the Second Temple. He was an eyewitness to the splendor of the Temple. He experienced the great events that took place there. Then the Temple was destroyed, and he was exiled. Years, later, he was allowed to return, but without the Temple. Is he going to rejoice about his current situation? Despite the achievement of a Jewish state, its lack of Beit Hamikdash and its overall nonreligious character created a sense of ambiguity for him.

A Response

Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (1949-2007, Israel), known as Rav Shagar, posits that the liturgical ambiguities of Yom Haatzmaut can be correlated with the religious complexities of the State of Israel. In an essay written in 1986, in his work *Bayom Hahu*, he notes:

Most of the Jewish people do not recite song or Hallel on Yom Haatzmaut—some because they are not believers and some because they are believers. It therefore seems that the practice that most reflects our situation is the widespread practice

רוב עם ישראל אינו אומר שירה והלל
 ביום העצמאות- אלו משום שאינם
 מאמינים ואלו משום שהנם מאמינים. לכן
 נראה שהנהוג המבטא את מצבנו יותר
 מכול הוא המנהג הרווח בחלק גדול

⁴ Cited by R. Eliyahu Schlesinger, *Al Mishkenot Haroim* pp. 100-101.

among large segments of the Religious Zionists based on the rulings of previous chief rabbis, Rabbis Herzog, Unterman and Nissim, of blessed memory, to recite Hallel without a blessing. This practice expresses our situation and standing. There are those who mock this incomplete situation, one that reflects anachronism. It is a condition with a gap between what you feel and what you do in practice. It is possible to feel contempt towards those who place themselves in this anachronistic situation, but it's possible that it expresses this very feeling, the feeling that we have not reached perfection. The Jewish people is not reciting song and if that is the case, this seems to be the will of God—Chizkiyahu was not punished, but it was clarified that he was not the Messiah.

Bayom Hahu pp. 201-202

מהציבור הדתי-לאומי, על פי פסק הרבניים בעבר, הרבנים הרצוג, אונטרמן ונסים זצ"ל, לומר הלל בלי ברכה. במנהג זה באים לידי ביטוי מצבנו ועמדתנו. יש הלועגים למין מצב לא שלם כזה, המבטא אנכרוניזם; מצב שיש בו פער בין מה שאתה מרגיש לבין מה שאתה עושה בפועל. אפשר לחוש בזו כלפי אלה המציבים עצמם במצב אנכרוניסטי זה, אבל ייתכן שהוא מבטא את ההרגשה הזו עצמה, את התחושה שלא הגענו לשלמות. עם ישראל כיום אינו אומר שירה ואם זהו המצב, כנראה זהו רצון ה' - חזקיהו אינו נענש אלא מתברר שהוא איננו משיח.
ביום ההוא, עמ' רא-רב

In this light, the wide variety of practices and perspectives can be well understood and appreciated. Each approach reflects a true aspect and facet of the State, including its historic contributions and its persistent challenges.

Yet, a spiritual danger continues to lurk for each and every perspective. For those whose expression of tefillah on Yom Haatzmaut is muted, the potential for not acknowledging the role of Hashem's Divine providence and a lack of gratitude to G-d for the Divine gift of the State of Israel is ever present. For those whose prayers contain exalted praises and thanks on this great day, the risk of accepting the spiritual status quo of a secular state and not striving for ambitious religious aspirations is also a constant. Perhaps our response today needs to address both of these concerns.

Regarding the first lesson, we must deepen our appreciation of the role of Hashem in guiding the destiny of the Jewish people:

Judaism confirmed ... the important idea that God might be found not only in nature but in history. And if we search for revelation in history, we will find it, more compellingly than anywhere else, in the history of that unusual people, our ancestors. For almost two thousand years Jews remained a distinctive nation without any of the usual prerequisites of nationhood. They had no land, no sovereignty, no power, no overarching political structures, not even a shared culture. They were scattered over the face of the earth, and almost everywhere they were a minority. For the most part, they refused active efforts to convert them and resisted the passive pull of assimilation. No other people kept its identity intact for so long in such circumstances.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Letter in the Scroll* pp. 37-38

The establishment of a State of Israel, a sovereign entity recognized by the world powers is certainly another step in Hashem's unfolding master plan of Jewish history, expressing the teaching of Shlomo Hamelech, the most insightful of all men:

A king's heart is like rivulets of water in the Lord's hand;

פְּלִגֵּי מַיִם לֵב מֶלֶךְ בְּיַד ה' עַל כָּל אֲשֶׁר יַחְפֹּץ יִטְּוּ.

wherever He wishes, He turns it.

משלי כא:א

Mishlei 21:1

The heart of the monarch—the national destiny—rests squarely and only in the hand of G-d. Each step in the history of the Jewish nation is being guided by unique *hashgacha* (Divine providence), which is obvious when considering the historical context of the founding of Israel. Hence, scores of the leading rabbis, roshei yeshiva and Chassidic rebbes from across the Torah world united in its early years to proclaim that the State is an expression of the “first buds of the beginning of the redemption.”⁵

Yet this achievement is also to be understood as a step in a long process, much like the slow, developing dawning of a new day:

R. Chiyah Rabbah and R. Shimon b. Chalafta were walking in the Arbel Valley at dusk and they saw the first rays of light. R. Chiyah Rabbah said to R. Shimon b. Chalafta: This is how the Jewish people will be redeemed, in the beginning it will be slow and as it continues it will speed up.

Yerushalmi, Peah 1:1

רבי חייא רבא ורבי שמעון בן חלפתא הוו מהלכין בהדא בקעת ארבל בקריצתה, וראו איילת השחר שבקע אורה. אמר רבי חייא רבא לרבי שמעון בן חלפתא בירבי: כך היא גאולתן של ישראל, בתחילה קמעא קמעא, כל מה שהיא הולכת היא רבה והולכת
ירושלמי פאה א:א

This dawning can be complex, and although it is never deterred, it can sometimes be occluded from view by clouds and storms.

Our current State of Israel is not the final destination as described by our prophets. The final vision features a rebuilt Beit Hamikdash as the centerpiece of the Divinely inspired Jewish society settled securely in the full land of Israel. Wherever one locates our current step of the process—the State of Israel—on the continuum of exile and redemption, we must still work to seek the day when our ultimate destiny is fulfilled. This notion of anticipating our redemption, considered a biblical mitzvah by the Semak (*siman* no. 1), calls upon us to constantly check and align our spiritual compass for the complete future redemption.

A Cause for Celebration

Despite the complexities of this reality reflected in the liturgy, we must always be mindful of an important lesson, imparted to us by the Rambam. The Rambam introduces the laws of Chanuka in his *Mishneh Torah* with a peculiar “halacha”:

In the time of the second Temple, when the Greeks ruled over Israel, they issued evil decrees against them, proscribing their religion and forbidding them to study the Law and to fulfill the commandments. They laid hands on their property and on their daughters, and they entered the Temple and made breaches in it, and defiled that which was ritually pure. Israel was in dire straits

בבית שני כשמלכי יון גזרו גזרות על ישראל ובטלו דתם ולא הניחו אותם לעסוק בתורה ובמצות. ופשטו ידם בממונם ובבנותיהם ונכנסו להיכל ופרצו בו פרצות וטמאו הטהרות. וצר להם לישראל מאד מפניהם ולחצום לחץ גדול עד

⁵ See R. Menachem Mendel Kasher's *Hatekufah Hagedolah* ch. 19. The list includes Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, Rav Yechezkel Sarna and many other great rabbis from that generation.

because of them and suffered great persecution until the G-d of our Fathers took pity on them and saved and delivered them from the hands of the Greeks. The Hashmonaim, descendants of the high priests, won a victory over them in which they slew the Greeks and saved Israel from their hands. They set up a king from among the priests and restored Israel's kingdom for more than two hundred years until the destruction of the Second Temple.

Rambam Hilkhos Hanukka 3:1

שריחם עליהם אלהי אבותינו
והושיעם מידם והצילם וגברו בני
חשמונאי הכהנים הגדולים והרגום
והושיעו ישראל מידם והעמידו
מלך מן הכהנים וחזרה מלכות
לישראל יתר על מאתיים שנים עד
החורבן השני:
רמב"ם הל' חנוכה ג:א

This passage is highly unusual. The *Mishneh Torah* is a legal code, not one which usually includes historical or philosophical selections; hence this paragraph is puzzling. What practice do we learn from this background? The Rambam is teaching that the historical background is essential to understanding the significance of the miracle of Chanuka and the laws that derive from it. Our prayers of thanks and praise must be expressed from within an understanding of the historical context. However, what is most striking is the concluding phrase: “[They] restored Israel’s kingdom for more than two hundred years until the destruction of the Second Temple.”

These two hundred years and the tragic history of the Hasmonean dynasty and Second Temple Period is well documented. The Kohanim and the Beit Hamikdash were corrupt and the political troubles of Israel were profound and ongoing. Strife and infighting were rampant. Yet, the Rambam includes the fact that there was Jewish autonomy and self-governance as an important accomplishment to be celebrated in the holiday of Chanuka. It was a complex reality, yet it was one that deserved celebration, according to Chazal.

In this light, we can say regarding the State of Israel that there is much for us to give praise and thanks as we do on Chanuka.⁶ We have merited to see the return of Jewish sovereignty to much of Eretz Yisrael, the ability of all Jews to return to our homeland and the flourishing of Jewish and Torah society within its confines. Today we can literally walk in the footsteps of our Avot and Imahot and experience Tanach come alive in Israel’s rolling hills and valleys. We hear about halachic concepts, such as Shabbat and *Shemittah*, becoming part of a public and national discourse and feel the sanctity of holy places under Jewish control. While all of these are fraught with complexities, they are surely reason enough for celebration, in whatever liturgical form it will be.

⁶ This connection between Chanuka and the State of Israel and its implication for appreciation is developed by Rav Yehuda Amital in a talk originally delivered on Chanuka 5757 [1996]. It appears in Hebrew in *Alon Shevut* #151 and in *Alon Bogrim* #11. It can be accessed online at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/yjerush/at59.htm>.