

Geulas Yisrael # 13

Which Comes First Redemption of Repentance

Moshe Taragin

Western civilization views history as evolutionary and open-ended. The future is completely unknown and is solely a product of human decision. Judaism views history very differently: it is predetermined and cyclical. History is constantly surging toward a terminus which resembles the genesis: a perfect world in which the Divine presence is uncontested by Man. Our world isn't static but is always "coursing" toward the conclusion of history, which we refer to as redemption or geulah.

The second premise of geulah is that humans and particularly Jews influence the pace and texture of redemption. Religious breakdown reverses the process; when we lost Yerushalayim the process stalled. However, we can also advance or even accelerate the process through faith and religious commitment. Jewish redemption redeems all of humanity and, as Kaballah reminds us, also affects multiple universes which lie beyond our realm. Redemption and the Jewish capacity to shape it, are cornerstones of Jewish belief.

Clearly, Jewish redemption of history is pivoted upon teshuva- both personal and collective. Sadly, we betrayed Hashem and fractured our world. A spiritual "turning-back" to Hashem is vital to redemption. What is less clear is whether historical redemption is contingent upon repentance. If the Jewish people do not repent will the process stall? Will history be left in the lurch? Parshat V'etchanan certainly suggests as much. Moshe describes the corruption and religious decline of the Jews when encountering the pagan culture of Canaan. Our disloyalty to Hashem caused our exile from the land and introduced historical suffering. Out of the pain of suffering "batzar lecha" we repent, return to Hashem and are restored. In Parshat V'etchanan human-initiated teshuva must trigger geulah.

Interestingly, this question was debated between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua in a dispute cited by the gemara in Sanhedrin (97). Notably, the Rambam endorsed Rabbi Eliezer's view that redemption can only emerge in the

aftermath of national teshuva. Redemptive history awaits the Jewish return to Hashem.

Even if we concur with Rabbi Eliezer and the Rambam that teshuva is a prerequisite for redemption, perhaps it doesn't *precede* redemption. Perhaps, a preliminary Messianic event will prompt teshuva which, in turn, will activate a final and complete redemption. For example, the Rambam portrays the Moshiach as a King who inspires a national spiritual reawakening. In the Rambam's Messianic narrative, Moshiach arrives prior to comprehensive teshuva with the task of driving us toward that complete repentance. Chazal attribute similar duties to Eliyahu Hanavi who arrives before Moshiach and inspires teshuva. Either way, teshuva isn't independently initiated by our people – it is aided by agents sent by Hashem. Teshuva is absolutely vital for complete redemption but Hashem dispatches proxies to steward the process.

Must "teshuva-catalysts" be people such as Moshiach or Eliyahu Hanavi? Perhaps, alongside the *people* who will steer teshuva, divinely choreographed *events* will spark national teshuva. Yechezkeil (chapter 34) describes Hashem retrieving His scattered sheep and herding them safely in the land of Israel. Having been reassembled securely under the shepherding of Hashem, we turn our hearts back to Him. This redemptive image of sheep-herding implies a unilateral redemptive process launched by the shepherd. Sheep don't perform teshuva but are forcibly herded. For Yechezkeil the actual return to Israel facilitates geula.

We are living through the prophecy of Yechezkeil. Our return to the land of Israel has shifted history and has launched a revolution of Jewish consciousness. Shepherding Jews back to Israel has sparked both teshuva as well as pre-teshuva responses. Religious-minded people process our return in religious terms. We sense a profound shift in our relationship with Hashem. Torah and spirituality are flourishing as we witness renewed Divine miracles. If Hashem our shepherd has once again expressed His love for us, we should be winking back with love, commitment and teshuva.

For other Jews, the State of Israel does not generate religious awakening but does entrench profound nationalistic identification. Millions of Jews deeply identify with the prospect of being "shepherded home". These sentiments are more

nationalistic than they are religious, but they do provide a historical bond which fastens millions of Jews to our common destiny. Might this national awakening be the "platform" for a future "history-altering" spiritual awakening. The Jews in Egypt abandoned almost all of their rituals and beliefs and descended to the moral and religious depths of their slave masters. Yet they retained their national identity, proudly preserving Hebrew language, dress and culture. This "national pride" formed the cornerstone for eventual religious awakening. It appears as if we are living through similar conditions. Jewish history is cyclical. What happened before will happen again.