

Yom Ha'atzmaut : Annual Cheshbon Hanefesh for Redemption

Moshe Taragin

We envision the original redemption from Egypt as a unilateral process driven solely by Divine intervention. The Jewish slaves were too feeble and too frail to actively initiate their own liberation. Yet, the book of Yechezkeil portrays a very different narrative. According to this version, Hashem invited the Jewish people to launch their salvation by taking the first step. Sadly, Jews had sunken into the depths of Egyptian pagan culture. Hashem invited them to author their recovery by retreating from this vulgar world of idols and black magic. Regrettably, the Jews remained impassive declining the Divine offer. Hashem's " preliminary " thought was to terminate Jewish history abandoning the Jews to their Egyptian prison.

By describing this alternate storyline of yetziat Mitzrayim, sefer Yechezkeil raises a provocative question which sefer shemot "overlooks": If the Jews betrayed Hashem's offer and warranted annihilation, why, ultimately, were they redeemed? Yechezkeil's answer is powerful: Though they didn't deserve redemption, the Jews were redeemed for the sake of G-d's name. Two and a half millennia had elapsed and humanity was still adrift in theological confusion, worshipping grotesque manmade gods. Finally, Avraham discovered the one unitary source of all reality and instilled this belief in his family and followers. The family evolved into a nation and, currently, that nation was primed to launch the great march of monotheism which would revolutionize the world. Destroying the Jewish people at that critical juncture of history would have reversed this process. Any regression of Hashem's presence in this world is a 'chilul Hashem'. The Jews in Egypt were redeemed not

because their behavior merited, but because the alternative would constitute too great a chilul Hashem.

The revolutions of Jewish history aren't always human-based or human-influenced. The Jewish people are sometimes redeemed as part of a larger celestial drama. We often benefit from larger concerns which our national experience is fused to.

So it was in Egypt 3300 years ago and so it was 73 years ago. It is difficult to imagine that our generation deserved redemption where previous generations did not. Each generation possesses its own merits and its own valor, but it would be historically myopic and disrespectful to previous generations to assume that our "record" was superior to theirs. We may not have deserved redemption, but historical conditions warranted that a redemptive act reshape history. The Holocaust wasn't just an attack against the Jewish people. Those five years comprised the darkest period in modern human history and, lamentably, were years in which Hashem's presence was indiscernible to the broader world. People of faith can detect Divine presence regardless of historical circumstance, but to the average bystander G-d had abandoned his world to malicious forces. A chilul Hashem of that magnitude required a response – one which would reintroduce G-d into the modern world.

Our redemption in 1948 was uncannily similar to our original redemption from Egypt. We may not have deserved redemption but the cosmic stakes of the 20th century determined that the Jewish people must be restored to illuminate Hashem's presence in a darkened world. The rise and fall of Jewish History impacts the presence of Hashem in our world. As we surge G-d's presence advances; as we slip, G-d's presence recedes.

Yom Ha'atzmaut is an annual opportunity to celebrate our redemption, but also, to assess the pace and success of our redemption. Redemption isn't just a gift it is a responsibility, a duty and a process. A process we accelerate or "brake" with our decisions and behavior.

In many aspects the Kiddush Hashem of the State of Israel continues its spectacular and dizzying advance. Against all odds our nation has developed into a regional superpower, an economic giant, and a world leader in science, technology and education. Recently, we have begun sharing our abundance. By exporting agro-technology, medical treatment and energy to the world we are actualizing Hashem's ancient pronouncement that Avraham's children will provide global prosperity. The regional reconciliation which the Abraham Accords have instigated contains further potential for Kiddush Hashem. These treaties are founded upon the practicalities of international politics but they have alleviated local tensions while providing potential for larger regional symbiosis.

Unfortunately, domestically we haven't been nearly as successful in advancing kiddush Hashem. The corona crisis held potential for national unity. Theoretically, a national health crisis could have served as rallying point to unite our diverse population against a common threat which doesn't discriminate between race or religion. Initially, during the early stages of the pandemic, patriotic sentiment and the ethos of "sacrificing for common welfare" yielded national unity. However, as the pandemic progressed, uneven adherence to health guidelines and politicization of the pandemic exposed latent rifts within Israeli society. Social and political tensions have increased and greater national unity still remains elusive.

The arc Jewish redemption is shaped by the larger drama of Hashem's expanding and contracting presence in our world. We

celebrate the great shift which occurred 73 years ago just as we yearn for a more accelerated pace. On Yom Ha'atzmaut we examine how we succeeded and how we failed in our efforts to hasten this process.