

Geulas Yisrael #50

Yom Ha'atzmaut- Saints, Sinners, and Second Sons

Living through redemption is never easy. Ecstatic that our historical dreams have materialized, we are sometimes exasperated by the confusion of redemption. Redemptive experience provides no road-map and the swirl often leaves us with more questions than answers. Living through geulah demands a deeper faith drawn from the collective soul of Jewish history.

One of the most baffling redemptive mysteries is the secular nature of our national rebirth. The initial Zionist visionaries were primarily secular, the state they crafted isn't religious, and our citizenry remains predominantly secular. This "state" we inhabit is very different from the Israel of our imaginations.

To many, the secular nature of this national renaissance proves that it cannot be the hand of G-d. Those who deny the divine nature of the state of Israel, continue to wait for a religiously-spirited redemption to restore, not just land and peoplehood, but recognition of Hashem from "one corner of the earth to the other". This hasn't yet transpired.

How do "believers" decode this historical enigma? The answer, of course lies in our past, deeply buried along the trail of Jewish history.

Throughout Jewish history two approaches were adopted toward religiously disobedient Jews. Some castigated them as sinners and historical outcasts. Others possessed enough imaginative sweep to validate the inner virtue of every Jew, both saints and sinners. Some excluded and some included. Hashem always showed preference for the includers.

Ironically the pious often excluded, while the less righteous sometimes found it easier to include. Moshe Rabenu suffers momentary tzara't after he questions our collective faith and doubts our ability to rally toward redemption. He quickly recovers from this misstep, becoming the great defender of disobedient Jews.

A jaded Eliyhau Hanavi ascends the Carmel mountains, and indicts the intransigent Jewish paganists. He is immediately "retired to Heaven" in a chariot of puritanical fire. Hashem doesn't desire prophets who highlight our flaws. He prefers those who defend our virtue, especially when it is less obvious.

By contrast, Gidon, a shofet or judge, hails from a questionable background and wasn't particularly pious. Yet he is promoted because he defends integrity of the Jews, wondering to Hashem why they continually suffer foreign invasion. The Jews of the Shoftim era weren't particularly righteous, but, Gidon argues, deserve a better fate. Gidon is precisely the type of leader Hashem seeks. Includers not Excluders.

Three hundred years ago, Chassidut revitalized a sullen and depressed Jewish world. A linchpin of this national revival was a claim about the inalienable virtue of every Jew. Each Jew is vested with Divine essence *חלק אלוה ממעל ממש* (Sefer HaTanya) and that sanctity remains unalterable- regardless of religious behavior. In the great tradition of the "includers" Chassidut ratified every Jew- saint and sinner.

The modern state of Israel is a modern tool for inclusion. Hashem programmed the Jewish heart with the ability to respond to history, people and homeland even in the absence of religious passion. He planted this deep whisper within our collective consciousness, and we are now hearing that divine whisper being broadcast.

Over the last two centuries, millions of Jewish hearts have become religiously shuttered. Frustrated by Jewish fate and traumatized by centuries of discrimination and persecution, many Jews traded in their religion for membership in a modern world which promised them equality and opportunity. In the wake of the Holocaust many Jews were either terrified of being Jewish or utterly confused by a G-d who could allow genocide. Over the past two centuries, and for the first time in history, we have watched most of our population walk out the door of religion.

Where would these Jews be without the state of Israel which has provided them a existential life-raft. Without the state of Israel, millions would be lost to historical oblivion. Yet, so may remain with us, partnering in this great national project of reconstructing history and defending our homeland. Their uncommon dedication and passion to our collective faith isn't human. It is the sound of a divine whisper. We are watching the hand of Hashem in action. You just need imaginative lenses to appreciate the grandeur of it all.

As we long for the day in which every Jew will turn back to religion, we must ratify all that is right and all that is sacred in the commitment of secular Jews to our land and to our common destiny. Sadly, this attitude of inclusion has begun to fade. In 1948 there were great hopes that the euphoria independence and the marvel of divine miracles would quickly turn hearts around. Rav Kook's writings are threaded with hopeful optimism in an inevitable religious reformation. Seventy-four years later we haven't witnessed this renewal. The horizons of a religious revival aren't easily apparent.

Additionally, the attitude of partnership has begun to fray in our politically charged world of identity politics and uncivil discourse. Polarized politics has made it ever-more difficult to reach "across the aisle" and celebrate the common bonds of history which unite us. In our world of sectarian politics, each sector viciously defends its own limited interests, rather than looking toward consensus agendas. Rude and confrontational discourse is "validated" to achieve a higher political "end. Recently, a religious parliament member chided his political opponents (some of whom are religious), questioning whether they should attend prayers in Jewish synagogues. It is difficult to imagine a statement more corrosive to "inclusive" Zionism. Shouldn't we dream of a world in which every Jew attends synagogue? It was a foolish and historically myopic statement uttered in the name of a political agenda.

Furthermore, social media has narrowed our conversation while locking us into echo chambers. We hear our own positions parroted and rarely appreciate the deeply Jewish values of the 'other'. Many religious Zionist Jews (like myself) live in isolated settlements, and rarely encounter secular Jews. Ignorance and lack of exposure always breeds caricature and stereotype. One of the hidden benefits of serving in Tzahal is the opportunity to encounter our secular partners and learn to appreciate their qualities and their patriotism.

The Riminover Rebbe- a late 18th century "founder" of Polish Chassidut- would refuse to designate the "second son" of the hagaddah as a sinner. He would simply call him the "second son". Millions of these "second sons" are now our partners. One day they will join us as "first sons".