

Geulas Yisrael #93

It is Not [Only] About Land

Close to forty years ago, a loud quarrel exploded during the Friday night Shabbat meal in my Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush. I was a quiet and naïve American, slowly acclimating to life in an Israeli yeshiva, but I distinctly remember the raised voices and the impassioned arguments swirling around me. My Shabbat meal had turned into a contentious ideological debate, and I will never forget that meal, nor the many faces and voices of that memorable debate.

The argument erupted in the aftermath of a Friday night speech or *sicha*, delivered before *maa'riv* by our revered Rosh Yeshiva, Harav Yehuda Amital. The final *pasuk* of *Pekudei* and of the entire *sefer Shemot*, portrays the *shechinah* of Hashem descending into a newly constructed *mishkan*. This epic scene of thick clouds enveloping the *mishkan* and preventing Moshe's entry closes the dramatic *sefer* of *Shemot*.

Chazal's nickname for the book of *shemot* is "*sefer Ha'Geulah*" or the book of redemption. This *sefer* chronicles our first redemption from the bondage of Egypt and from the tyranny of Pharo. Our first *geulah* serves as the template for all future redemptions.

Yet, bizarrely, this book of redemption culminates in a barren desert, hundreds of kilometers away from the chosen land of redemption.

Addressing this unusual scene, Rav Amital referred us to the Ramban's introduction to *sefer Shemot*. The Ramban's commentary to the Torah is an encyclopedic and seminal work delineating the fundamentals of belief and of religious experience. My other Rosh Yeshiva, Harav Aharon Lichtenstein once remarked that if he were deserted upon an abandoned island with an option to bring one *sefer*, he would choose the Ramban's commentary to the Torah.

The Ramban introduces each *sefer* of the Torah with a preface distilling the overall theme of that book. In his well-known introduction to *sefer Shemot*, the Ramban describes redemption as a revival of the spiritual condition of our ancestors, or a return to *מעלות אבותם*. When Hashem's presence descends into our world, as it did after the *mishkan* was completed, this original and perfect spiritual state is recovered thereby

achieving redemption. Evidently, redemption isn't limited to geography or to the land of Israel, but is experienced anytime we encounter Hashem's presence.

You can imagine how this revolutionary concept enflamed the patriotic Israeli students who had been trained to view redemption as bound to the land of Israel.

Preliminary vs. Final Redemption

In truth, the final redemption of history, can only unfold *in Israel* as our people convene back in our homeland and beckon the entire world to encounter Hashem in Yerushalayim. *Final* redemption is an event limited to Israel, but the *ongoing process* of redemption is continuous, unfolding *whenever* and *wherever* we rendezvous with Hashem.

A "long" redemptive process spanning centuries is the leadup to the final "moment" of history, and this "long" redemptive process isn't limited to one specific set of events or one specific location. Redemption is the engine constantly driving history to its inevitable terminus.

In his comments to Megillah (17), Rashi differentiates between the beracha of ga'al yisrael or גאל ישראל which concludes the final section of our daily keriyat shema tefillah and the phrase go'el yisrael or גואל ישראל which concludes the beracha in shmoneh esrei. The former beracha refers to *an event* – our first geulah from Egypt, but the latter phrase refers to the ongoing process of redemption which has braced Jewish history.

The "Long" Redemption

There is an unhealthy and even disrespectful tendency to regard the pre-1948 era of Jewish history as a pre-redemptive period marked by helpless suffering and perpetual victimhood. Israelis often disparage a יהודי גלותי or a shameful "Jew of exile" who was vulnerable and powerless, as opposed to the proud יהודי ישראלי who can protect and defend himself. Everything prior to 1948 had absolutely no redemptive resonance.

This sharp bifurcation between pre-1948 and post-1948 makes it challenging for Israelis to appreciate the richness and depth of Jewish experience over the past 2000 years, and is partially responsible for the

religious crisis which many Israelis struggle with. If we only look forward it is difficult to look back in appreciation.

This long view of redemption integrates our past with our future. Our redemptive heroes aren't limited to Herzl and Ben-Gurion but also include Rebbi Akiva, the Rambam, Rav Yosef Karo and every *poshete yid* or simple Jew who preserved faith and Jewish religion under unimaginably demanding conditions. Redemption began in 70 AD, the moment the last Jew to leave Jerusalem performed the very first mitzvah. Every mitzvah, every moment of Torah study and every act of chesed, has been contributing this gradual and cumulative process.

Two Shifts

Though redemption has been aggregating for thousands of years, in 1948 two changes occurred. Firstly, the pace began to rapidly accelerate. Secondly, in 1948 redemption shifted from the backstage of history to the front stage. Before 1948 the redemptive process was purely *metaphysical*, invisible to the naked eye. History seemed unmoved by our religious acts, even though we knew that in the background, our mitzvot were advancing redemption.

In 1948 redemption surfaced in our visible world. We are now building a country, infrastructure, homes, and cities which will welcome moshiach. Our generation has been privileged to experience and participate in redemption upon two stages- the backstage of metaphysical world and the front stage of history.

Inspiring Land With Religion

The Ramban's view of geulah also underscores that a return to our land is redemptively incomplete until and unless we draw Hashem's presence into our state. Merely living in the land doesn't redeem us.

Many olim suffer a redemptive lapse or redemptive withdrawal. Euphoric at returning home, they often suffer religious setbacks. Life in Israel provides a false sense of religious security: what can go wrong where everyone is Jewish, and everything is kosher? Many of the strict religious safeguards and precautions which were protected us when living overseas, are relaxed. Stepping off the plane and integrating into

Israeli society is not enough to be considered *redeemed*. Bringing Hashem to our state and to our world is the essential goal of redemption.

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Furthermore, the Ramban's view of redemption helps us better calibrate our redemptive investments. Over the past 50 years our settlement of greater Israel has transformed our people. The 1948 map of Israel was a hollowed-out parcel of land, devoid of much of the Biblical homeland. In 1967 we returned to the corridor of Jewish history stretching from Shechem in the North, snaking its way through Yerushalayim, Beit Lechem, Chevron and Be'er Sheva. Our nation was carved out in this region and our return in 1967 felt like a return to the pages of Tanach.

This project as blessed by Hashem and we have defiantly spearheaded this difficult challenge. However, we have also invested *too much* in settling land and not enough in other areas of Israeli society or in other national agendas which are also part of redemption. Sadly, our efforts at settling the land have isolated us from the rest of Israeli population, making it even more difficult to both appreciate secular Israelis and to inspire them to our religious values.

Returning to our land is insufficient to be considered redemption. We must invest in all areas and all sectors of Israeli life to assure that we craft the type of society which can house Hashem's presence.

By returning to the condition of our ancestors in our land we can close history.