

Parashat Bechukotai: The Rav and the Land

An ominous verse in *Parashat Bechukotai* describes a time when the Jewish people will have estranged themselves from their faith and God. God says He will bring them to the land of their enemies to subdue them, but He will not abandon them. "I shall remember My covenant with Yaakov, and also My covenant with Yitzchak, and even My covenant with Avraham shall I remember. And I shall remember the land" (Leviticus 26:42). What role does the land play here?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik took this to mean that no matter how far a Jew strays from tradition and the legacy of the Patriarchs, the Land of Israel will remind him or her of their Jewishness. The mere presence of the Promised Land ensures that the Jew never fully forgets the covenant of old and remains cognizant of the difference between him and his non-Jewish neighbors.¹

A similar interpretation of this verse was offered by Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, a confidant and disciple of Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, who lived at a time when the chalutzim were resettling the land. He wrote that the Jewish people might not have lived up to the measure of Yaakov, most perfect of the Patriarchs; nor did they emulate Yitzchak's self-sacrifice; and perhaps they even were not faithful to Avraham's compassion and charity. Still, so long as they continue to harbor the desire to return to the land and rebuild it from its ruins, it is enough for God to redeem them. The return to the land will truly catalyze the nation's return to Torah observance.²

Hearing the Call

Song of Songs develops its allegory through the lover and the beloved. At one point, the woman says the words *kol dodi dofek*, the voice of my beloved knocks (Song of Songs 5:2). The Midrash interprets this as a reference to the return to Zion spearheaded by Ezra and Nechemiah. There was a clarion call (*kol*) to build the Second Temple, which unfortunately remained unheeded by the vast majority of the Jewish people.

It is no wonder, then, that the Rav chose these memorable words for the title of his unforgettable discourse concerning the State of Israel.³ On *Yom Ha'atzmaut* (Israel's Independence Day) of 1956, only eight years after the establishment of the State of Israel, the Rav referenced this passage from *Shir ha-Shirim*. The lover knocks on his beloved's door one night but she tells him she is too tired and he should come back the next day. When he fails to show, she searches in vain to find him. He is gone forever, she has missed her chance. With great drama and prophetic overtones, the Rav found the realization of this verse in recent history:

Eight years ago, in the midst of a night of the terrors of Majdanek, Treblinka, and Buchenwald; in a night of gas chambers and crematoria; in a night of total divine self-concealment; in a night ruled by the devil of doubt and destruction who sought to sweep the Lover from her own tent into the Catholic Church; in a night of continuous

¹ Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks*, 150–151.

² *Mei Marom, Nimukei Mikra'ot*, 163.

³ Gordon, "Note," 86–89.

searching for the Beloved — on that very night the Beloved appeared. The Almighty, who was hiding in His splendid sanctum, suddenly appeared and began to beckon at the tent of the Lover, who tossed and turned on her bed beset by convulsions and the agonies of hell. Because of the beating and knocking at the door of the mournful Lover, the State of Israel was born.⁴

Open the Door

The Rav enumerated six thunderous knocks on the door of the Jewish Diaspora, some which are nothing less than miraculous:

1. *Politics*: The first knock of the Beloved—God—was the recognition by both the West and the Soviet Union, already vying against each other for global supremacy, of the Jewish State's legitimacy. The United Nations came into being solely to facilitate that right and did so by recognizing the State of Israel in May 1948. A year later, Israel was accepted as a member of the United Nations.
2. *The military*: Following the establishment of the State of Israel, the second knock came on the battlefield, when the relatively small Israel Defense Forces defeated the much larger and far better equipped armies of five Arab countries.
3. *Theology*: The third knock was on the theological tent. Christian theologians had claimed that God deprived the Jewish people of its right to the land and that all the biblical promises referred concerning Zion and Jerusalem referred typologically to Christianity and the Church. The establishment of the state disproved that.
4. *Assimilation*: The fourth knock was on the heart of the perplexed and assimilated youth. God's concealment during the Holocaust resulted in great confusion, particularly among the young, and led to widespread assimilation. The State of Israel helped restore Jewish identity.
5. *Self-defense*: The fifth knock drove home the fact that for the first time in the history of our exile divine providence showed our enemies that Jewish blood is not free.
6. *Refuge*: The sixth knock resounded when the gates of the nascent state were opened, and Jews the world over knew they could seek refuge from hostile countries in Israel.

Beyond these knocks, there is another wondrous dimension to the return of the Jewish people to their land. A verse in *Parashat Bechukotai* makes a prophetic statement: "I shall make the land desolate, and your foes who inhabit it will be desolate" (Leviticus 26:32). This is a comfort of sorts: although the Jews will be exiled from their land, none of their conquerors or successors will ever prosper on it.⁵ Indeed, over the millennia of Jewish exile the land that once flowed with milk and honey remained desolate, a rocky, gloomy, and inhospitable land. Were it not for the fact that empires could not settle it for good, the Rav observed, the Jewish people would never have been able to make their stunning return and make the desert bloom.⁶

⁴ *Kol Dodi Dofek*, "Six Knocks."

⁵ Rashi ad loc., quoting *Sifra*, 6:5.

⁶ Soloveitchik, *Fate and Destiny*, 37.

Not Answering the Door

The Rav called to his listeners, Orthodox Jews not typically involved in settling the land, to open the door and respond to this historical moment:

It is precisely Orthodox Jews, more than any other American Jews, who bear the burden of guilt for the slow pace of conquest through taking possession. The obligation to pay close attention to “the voice of my Beloved” that knocketh and respond to Him immediately with mighty deeds and undertakings devolves precisely upon us who are faithful to traditional Judaism.⁷

Some religious Jews argued that settling the Land of Israel is not central to Judaism, because the Rambam does not enumerate it as one of the 613 commandments. The Rav was convinced that such people misunderstood the Rambam’s entire project. The omission of this imperative from the list does not render it any less important. If that were the case, the Rambam’s omission of the first commandment on the Rambam’s list, “I am the Lord your God who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2), would deny its centrality to Judaism! It must be that the count of the mitzvot is about conceptually categorizing the Torah rather than making an exhaustive list of everything important in Judaism.⁸

In 1967, the Rav received a letter from Mrs. Miriam Shiloh, an Israeli Religious Zionist educator then teaching high school students at Givat Washington near Kibbutz Yavneh. As was common at the time, her students read *Kol Dodi Dofek*. At its conclusion, they asked her why the Rav himself had not made aliyah, and she, in turn, directed their query to the Rav himself. He responded in Hebrew:

I thank you for your words and accept your rebuke willingly. Indeed, I sinned against the Holy Land. I am amongst those who have fallen back (in not coming to the Holy Land). Of course, many factors that were out of my control prevented me. In spite of this, I am not searching for any excuse, nor am I justifying myself. I am guilty, and the blame rests on my shoulders.⁹

The Rav had very good reasons for staying in the United States. His candidness and readiness to scrutinize his decision, finding himself at fault, is both striking and inspiring.

Cautious Exuberance

Although the Rav’s address weaves Scripture into the present with regard to the State of Israel, it falls short of understanding current events as prophetic and carrying eschatological meaning. The Rav elucidated his approach in this way:

There is a third halachic approach which is neither parallel to the position of those “whose eyes are shut” and reject [the significance of the State] nor the belief of those

⁷ Ibid., 36–37.

⁸ Lustiger, *Derashot Harav*, 178–180. Rabbi Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal proposed a different solution based on a teaching by Rabbi Yonah Dov Blumberg. The Rambam was simply being consistent. In the fourth prefatory principle to his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, he writes that he does not count a mitzvah that encompasses the entire Torah. The mitzvah of settling the land is precisely such a biblical, all-encompassing mitzvah (Teichtal, *Eim Habanim Semeichah*, 154).

⁹ *Community, Covenant and Commitment*, 227.

dreamers who adopt a completely positive stance to the point where they identify the State with the [fulfilment] of the highest goal of our historical and meta-historical destiny. This third approach (which is the normative one in all areas), I would allow myself to guess, would be positively inclined toward the State, and would express gratitude for its establishment out of a sense of love and devotion, but would not attach excessive value to the point of its glorification and deification.¹⁰

Those “whose eyes are shut” are the Haredim, whom the Rav faults for refusing to acknowledge the miraculous nature of the State’s founding, denying its historical significance, and showing no interest in taking part in its development. The “dreamers” are followers of Rav Kook, who regard the State as possessing inherent spiritual value and assign it an overwhelmingly important role in the unfolding of Jewish destiny.¹¹

Rabbi Dovid Miller, the Rosh Kollel at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, and his wife once visited the Rav at his home in Boston. His wife asked the Rav about the long-held tradition, accepted by Briskers like the Rav, that the Jews will only be exiled twice. Does that mean that the Jews have returned to their land for good? The Rav took a moment to think and replied, “I am really not sure.”¹²

The Rav’s position was characteristically nuanced. On the one hand, the poetic and lofty rhetoric of *Kol Dodi Dofek* contextualized the wonders and the hand of God in contemporary Jewish history. On the other hand, he deeply believed that the State’s success depends not on divine miracles but on our own actions, sacrifice, and prayer.

Exploring the Rav’s Insight

The Rav offered the following insight about *birkat ha-mazon* (Grace after Meals) and our modern-day return to the land. In the second paragraph, we describe the land as “desirable” (*chemdah*), “good” (*tovah*), and “spacious” (*rechavah*). The latter two descriptions appear in the Torah (Exodus 3:8), while the first appears only in the Prophets (Jeremiah 3:19). Why, then, did the Sages decide to put specifically that one first?

The Rav explained that “desirable” reflects the yearning of the Jews for their homeland. The attachment to the land is not rational and cannot be explained in logical terms. Moshe lived right near the Ark for forty years, yet he begged God to let him cross into the land. He felt something special, even if it could not be accounted for by reason.¹³ Similarly, the chalutzim faced great hardships and dangers building up the land, but they were determined to return, settle, and rebuild. The land for them was *chemdah*, a land that was yearned for even in the absence of religious motivations.

¹⁰ Ibid., 163–164 (brackets and parentheses in the original).

¹¹ Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility*, 293.

¹² Rabbi Dovid Miller, “High School Program: The Rav on Zionism and Medinat Yisrael,” <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/792514/rabbi-dovid-miller/high-school-program-the-rav-on-zionism-and-medinat-yisrael/> (accessed August 9, 2021).

¹³ Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks*, 136–138. This also deflates the argument that one should not make aliyah since it can expose a person to religiously unsavory influences, whereas staying in an insular community in the Diaspora can prove more wholesome.