**“This Day God Has Made - Let Us Rejoice and Be Glad in It”**

Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital

Adapted by Dr. Aviad Hacohen

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand because of his old age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts: If it will be wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this nation in those days, it will also be wondrous in my eyes, says the Lord of hosts.” (*Zekharia* 8:4-6)

In this description by the prophet Zekharia, no exceptional or supernatural phenomenon is mentioned. There is no unique event, nor any description of awesome strength. All we have here, in effect, is a simple, pastoral description of normal life. The grandfather and grandmother are sitting in Jerusalem, walking-sticks in hand, and the grandchildren are playing in the streets. Can it be that it is this very scene that, according to the prophet, will be “wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this nation?” Is it possible that such a natural scene prompts God to add, “it will also be wondrous in my eyes?”

            Zekharia prophesied great and inspiring events, but it is specifically here that “wondrousness” is mentioned. Moreover, Rabbi Akiva, the great Tanna, was able to look clearly, to smile and to laugh at the very destruction of the Temple when he was reminded of this prophecy. The gemara (*Makkot* 24b) recounts the story of Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya and Rabbi Yehoshua who were walking towards Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple:

“When they reached Mt. Scopus they tore their clothes. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox coming out of the place of the Holy of Holies. They began to cry, and Rabbi Akiva began to laugh. They said to him, ‘Why do you laugh?’ He answered, ‘Why do you cry?’ They said to him, ‘The place of which it is said (*Bamidbar* 1), “And the stranger who comes near will die” now has foxes walking in it; shall we not cry?’

He said to them, ‘For that reason I laugh. For it is written (*Yeshayahu* 8), “I appoint for Myself faithful witnesses - Uriah Ha-Kohen and Zekharia ben Yevarekhyahu.” What connection can there be between Uriah and Zekharia? After all, Uriah lived during the time of the First Temple, while Zekharia lived during the Second. But God made Zekharia’s prophecy dependent on that of Uriah. Of Uriah it is written (*Mikha* 3), “Therefore because of you Zion shall be ploughed like a field,” while in Zekharia we learn, “Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem.” Until the prophecy of Uriah was fulfilled, I was afraid that Zekharia’s prophecy would never come true. Now that Uriah’s prophecy has been fulfilled, Zekharia’s prophecy will certainly be fulfilled as well.’

With that they said to him, ‘Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us.’”

            But why did Rabbi Akiva mention specifically this prophecy of Zekharia? Was this all that he prophesied? Did he not prophesy greater things than this? Was it not Zekharia who said, “Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for I come and I will dwell in the midst of you... and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you” (ibid. 2:14-15)? Why is this prophecy not mentioned? Did Zekharia’s prophecies involve only boys and girls, old men and women? Did he not speak (ibid. 12:7-8) of God “giving victory to the tents of Yehuda first... On that day shall the Lord defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the feeblest among them shall be like David; and the house of David shall be like a divine being, like the angel of the Lord at their head?” We could bring many other examples. What is it, then, that makes this prophecy of “old men and women in Jerusalem, their sticks in their hands” and of “boys and girls playing in the streets,” so special? Why is it this prophecy that brings comfort?

            Prophecies concerning supernatural events that will take place in the future are understandable. The suffering was extraordinary, exile was extraordinary - the entire country was emptied of its inhabitants, all being led away into captivity, young and old alike. An extraordinary phenomenon. But the prophet announces publicly: Life will return to its usual path, life will be normal again! “Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem...”

            A profound idea is contained herein. Someone who lacks a historical awareness, someone who sees only the present and is cut off from the past, is incapable of seeing the future, and perceives even the present in a distorted way. Rabbi Akiva was someone with historical perspective.

“Remember the days of old, understand the years of ages past. Ask your father and he shall expound to you, your elders - and they shall tell you” (*Devarim* 32:7). Very recently, on the Seder night, we discussed the story of the Exodus from Egypt. We started with “Originally our fathers were idol-worshippers, and now God has brought us near to His service, as it is written: ‘And Joshua said to the nation: Your forefathers dwelt on the other side of the Jordan; Terach, the father of Avraham and the father of Nachor, and they served other gods. And I took your father, Avraham, and I led him throughout the land of Canaan....’” How is this connected to the exodus from Egypt? The answer is that one event cannot be analyzed in isolation. The background to any event is broad. The exodus from Egypt cannot be understood without first understanding “Terach, the father of Avraham....”

            Someone who does not understand the meaning of an entire nation being exiled from its land, cannot understand the historical significance of its return. Eretz Yisrael was entirely emptied of all her inhabitants. Has such a thing ever happened in history? A nation that was exiled from its land, and returns to it?

            The prophet says, “Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem.” Once again there will be “boys and girls playing in its streets.” Simple, normal life. Only someone with a deep historical awareness can understand the significance of such a scene. Miracles are one-time events. But Jews living a normal life in Eretz Yisrael, after seventy years (of the Babylonian exile) during which the country was empty and desolate - someone looking with historical perspective can only be astonished. Of him the prophet says, “If it will be wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this nation in those days, it will also be wondrous in my eyes, says the Lord of hosts.”

            Normal life, that which other nations accept as a natural phenomenon, is perceived by us as a meta-historical one, a manifestation of the Divine. For them everything is “smooth” - “And Esav continued on his way to Se’ir;” such is the way of the world. But “Yaakov and his sons went down to Egypt.” For us, every natural phenomenon becomes a supernatural one. For us, everything is always different.

            After two thousand years, children play in the streets of Israel, in the squares of Jerusalem! Can this be a natural phenomenon, after two thousand years? For us, everything is always different.

            The connection between the nation of Israel and their land was created differently from that of any other nation. In the natural course of events, the connection between a nation and its land is created after people have lived in a certain area for a long time, have fought for it, have lived through shared experiences and troubles. For us, everything is different. Our connection to our land was created before the first Jew had set foot on it! “And God said to Avram, ‘Go out of your country, from your birthplace, from your father’s house, to the land which I shall show you” (*Bereishit* 12:1). It was then that the connection was formed. “The covenant which He made with Avraham, and His oath to Yitzchak, and confirmed it to Yaakov as a law, and to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying: To you I will give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance; when they were few in number, a mere handful sojourning there...” (*Tehillim* 105:9-12). This was a unique event; it has no parallel in history.

            Just as the connection between the nation of Israel and its land did not follow the natural order, so the connection between the nation and the State was formed before the Jewish nation was in the land. Along came a Jew from an assimilated household, lacking any background in Judaism, lacking any familiarity with Jewish culture, and - using “Jewish intuition” alone - revealed what *Chazal* had long before understood: that Zion is the birthplace of all Jews, “both those actually born there as well as those who yearn to see it.” Herzl understood, purely through intuition, that although there were almost no Jews living in Eretz Yisrael, nevertheless this would become the Jewish State. Is it generally acceptable for a nation to choose a place, go there, and create a state? Isn’t a state usually created for people who already live there, and not for the sake of those who will flock to it after it is created?

            At the time of the Balfour Declaration, in 1917, how many Jews were there in this country? A few tens of thousands? Nevertheless, the Declaration stated that “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.” A strange phenomenon. So too later, when Britain betrayed the Jewish nation by refusing to allow the survivors of Auschwitz and Majdanek entry into the land. The mighty Britain closed the doors. Certain of her policy, Britain made every effort to prevent the establishment of a Jewish State in Eretz Yisrael, and transferred the decision into the hands of the United Nations, fully confident that this body would leave control of the region in Britain’s hands.

            And then the unbelievable happened. A committee was formed and its recommendation was to create two states in Eretz Yisrael; a Jewish state and an Arab state. In order for such a resolution to be passed, a two-thirds majority of the UN was required. And the UN was clearly divided, with a cold war between East and West. Whatever one side supported, the other would reject. And even if the countries of the East and West would agree, what would be the position of Uruguay, Paraguay, and all the other little countries - how would they vote?

            The family history of every ambassador from Uruguay and Paraguay was carefully investigated in the hope of finding a grandmother, a third-cousin, anyone who served as a connection to Judaism. One of the delegates, Dr. Leo Cohen, told me that throughout the day of the UN vote he walked around with a book of *Tehillim* in his hand. “Only a miracle could save us.” To obtain a two-thirds majority...!

            I remember it well. On the 29th of November I was at Kibbutz Be’erot Yitzchak. We all listened intently to the voting on the radio: “Yes. No. Yes. No.” And the miracle happened: two thirds! An unprecedented event.

            But what happened after that? Today we live in a “now” generation: Peace now, Mashiach now, Terrorism now, Quiet now - everything must be now. We are incapable of imagining what tomorrow might bring. Everything is measured by the yardstick of what is happening today. Today is quiet - tomorrow will be too. Today there is terrorism - tomorrow it will continue. Today there is peace - tomorrow there will be peace. It is a generation with an impaired sense of history. There is no awareness of the past, and none of the future. Only a sense of today, of now.

            In 1948, it was a different generation, one with historical perspective. Recently we have suffered terrible terrorist attacks. Let me tell you something: During those few months, between the UN vote on the 29th of November and the Declaration of Statehood on the 5th of Iyar, there were seven car bombs here. One of them, on Ben-Yehuda Street, killed fifty Jews. And this in addition to the victims killed by marauders on the roads and by snipers in the *yishuvim*. I won’t mention too much, I won’t detail everything that happened here in Gush Etzion. All within five months. The Convoy of 35 fell, the Nebi Daniel force lost fifteen victims, an attack on the high ground here brought another twelve to their deaths, and an attack on another convoy making its way to the Gush cost another ten lives.

            And do you know how many victims fell here in Gush Etzion on the 3rd and 4th of Iyar, 5708? More than a hundred and fifty. Just two days before the declaration of the State!

            Two hundred and forty victims fell during those five months. And despite it all, the establishment of the State was declared, and the next day everyone recited *Hallel* with great excitement. People danced in the streets. Had they gone mad?

            It was the strong sense of history that prompted this. That generation knew and understood the significance of Jewish independence in Eretz Yisrael after two thousand years. A State meant not for the six hundred thousand Jews living there then, but for millions of Jews. Each person understood that he was fighting for the millions who would come.

            What were the borders of that State? They did not include the Kotel. Nahariya was not ours, nor were Nazareth, Lod, Ramle, Ashkelon, Be’er Sheva. Jerusalem was an international city. What were they saying Hallel for?

            They said Hallel for the sovereignty that had returned to Israel. They remembered the words of the Rambam in Hilkhot Chanuka, where he teaches that in the merit of the Chashmona’im, “Sovereignty returned to Israel for two hundred years.” They understood the significance of that sovereignty. There was a strong belief that “It was not by their sword that they took the land, nor their might that saved them, but rather Your right hand and Your arm, and the light of Your countenance, for You favored them” (*Tehillim* 44:4). Without “You favored them,” there is nothing.

            I’m not even discussing the fact that the next day I had to rush to finish reciting *Hallel* because I had been drafted. They began to invade from all sides: from Egypt, from Syria, from Jordan, from Lebanon. Units from Iraq. How were we supposed to stand up to them, after the British had forbidden us to stockpile arms? All in all we were six hundred thousand Jews.

            If, in Zekharia’s time, normal life in Israel after seventy years was considered wondrous, should we consider it natural after two thousand years?

            Three books of *Nevi’im* - *Chagai*, *Zekharia* and *Mal’akhi* - and two from *Ketuvim* - *Ezra* and *Nechemia* - deal with a total of forty thousand Jews in Eretz Yisrael. Those were all that remained. Forty thousand. And today, thanks to the grace of God, we have merited to see over four million Jews in Israel!

            Someone who cannot see the past will also be incapable of seeing the future, and of perceiving God’s hand, “when God redeems the captivity of His nation.” Can a nation rising out of the ashes of the Sho’ah allow itself to ignore this?

            True, you are all young. You never saw all of this. You were born, as it were, to a life of freedom. You never experienced Jews living in bunkers, longing for any type of freedom, praying for the day when they could walk in the streets and look around without fear. Only someone who looks at the entire two thousand years and sees Jews being led into exile by Titus, sees the Crusades and pogroms - only someone who sees all of this understands the meaning of Jewish independence after two thousand years.

            And “it is not by their sword that they took the land.” No such thing ever happened before. It is no wonder that the Arabs cannot understand it - along come the Jews after two thousand years and claim their ownership of Eretz Yisrael. “What are you doing here? How long did you live in Eretz Yisrael, anyway?” If you do the calculations, you’ll see that Jews lived in Yemen for longer.

            Is it possible not to see the great hand of God?

            Someone who sees only today, now, is disturbed by problems and questions. But someone with a feel for history knows, like Rabbi Akiva who saw a fox coming out of the place of the *Kodesh Kodashim*, that “old men and women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem.”

            The prophet Yirmiyahu (33:10-12) says,

“Thus says the Lord: Again there shall be heard in this place - which you say is desolate, empty of man and of beast; in the cities of Yehuda and in the streets of Jerusalem which are deserted and without man, without inhabitant, and without animal - the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who will say, ‘Praise the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His kindness is forever’ when they bring thanksgiving offerings to God’s house. For I shall return the captivity of the land as in former times, says the Lord.”

For our many sins, we have yet to merit seeing the “bringing of thanksgiving offerings to God’s house.” But the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedola, when they composed the blessing recited at weddings, left out the end of the verse and changed it to read: “Again there shall be heard in the cities of Yehuda and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the joyous voice of bridegrooms emanating from the *chupa* and that of the young men coming from their celebration.” What are the “young men” here celebrating? Are they holding a “*siyum*?” Or simply wasting time?

            They are, in fact, the representatives of “normal life.” A normal state of affairs involves young people coming out of parties, and it was them to whom the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedola referred. Are we blind to the fulfillment of this prophecy? Have we not participated in the joy of bridegrooms and brides in Jerusalem? Have we not danced in its streets? Have we not been witness to the joyous sounds of wedding parties emanating from the *chupa*?

            I have much in my heart that is waiting to be said. But for now let me just note three matters which require special emphasis in light of current events:

            1. The need to strive for unity. God does not punish the community so long as it functions as a “community.” A *midrash* *aggada* in the *Talmud* *Yerushalmi* (*Pe’a* 1:1, folio 16a) asks: “How is it possible that in the generation of King David, where everyone - even the children - knew Torah, when they went out to war there were casualties, while in the days of King Achav, a generation of idol-worshippers, when they went out to war they were always victorious?” The gemara explains, “In the days of King David there was causeless hatred and informing. In the days of Achav, despite the fact that they were idol-worshippers, they were united among themselves, and hence they were victorious in war.” Unity is the first basic requirement, and we must guard it carefully.

            2. The need to strengthen our appreciation of Jewish sovereignty.

            3. The need to strengthen the moral foundation of our nation, to fight materialism, and to raise the moral, religious, Torah and cultural level of the nation. We cannot focus all our energies on the fight for land and ignore these issues.

            We have prevailed in worse times and we shall prevail now. But we have to know that without a strong sense of history we shall not be able to understand what is happening here. If we fail to take our past into account, we will not understand the future, and even our appreciation of the present will be perverted.

            Today let us all say, “I have faith in your loving- kindness, my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I shall sing to the Lord for He has rendered me good” (*Tehillim* 13:6), and “God has given me suffering - but has not left me to die!” (118:18).

“Open for me the gates of righteousness, I shall enter them and praise God... I praise You for You have answered me, and have been my salvation. The stone which the builders despised has become the chief cornerstone. This is God’s doing - it is wondrous in our eyes. This day God has made - let us be joyful and glad in it!” (*Tehillim* 118:19-24)

[This *sicha* was delivered on Yom HaAtzma’ut 5754 (1994).]