YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YHE-HOLIDAY: SPECIAL YOM HA-ATZMA’UT 5776 SHIUR**

**“We Shall be Glad and Rejoice in You”**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l***

Adapted by Yisrael Wohlman and David Greenberg

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“And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Son of man, when the house of Israel dwelled in their own land, they defiled it by their way and by their actions… For I will take you from among the nations, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land… And you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people, and I will be your God.” (*Yechezkel* 36:16-28)

There are those who do not view what started on the 5th of Iyar, 5708, as the realization of this prophecy. Someone who places these events in a category that is not worthy of them and nevertheless recites *Hallel* on Yom HaAtzma’ut – concerning him the Gemara says, “One who recites *Hallel* on an ordinary day is a blasphemer” (*Shabbat* 118b). Only the recognition that everything that this day symbolizes is written here, in this chapter describing the great process of the coming-into-being of a nation, along with “I will be your God” – only that can justify the recitation of *Hallel*. Someone who regards the establishment of Israel merely as an attempt to ensure Jewish survival, someone who is unwilling to accept the reflection of this chapter of *Yechezkel* in our reality, must answer many questions and address innumerable difficulties. Only someone who sees the establishment of the state as part of a long and significant process can truly thank and give song to God. As the *Sefat Emet* teaches, song changes with the times: each day has its own special song, and each year is special in its own way.

Concerning the verses, “I shall give thanks to You for You have answered me… This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it (*bo*)” (*Tehillim* 118:21-24), *Chazal* debate whether the word “*bo*” refers to God Himself (such that the verse might be translated as, “This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in Him”), or whether it refers to the day (“we will rejoice and be glad in it”). In support of the former option they cite the verse, “The King has brought me into His chambers, we shall be glad and rejoice in You” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 1:4) – meaning, in God. Yet they also raise the latter option, namely, rejoicing in the day. What could this mean? If we look at what *Am Yisrael* has experienced over the past year, we cannot help wondering how anyone can think of isolating this day from all that preceded it and all that has happened over the course of the year. It is not easy to sing when *Am Yisrael* has sacrificed hundreds of casualties for the sake of the security of the state. It is not easy to sing when friends who sang here with us last year, are no longer with us.

Is it possible to sever a day like this from time, from the era in which we live, arguing that “at a time of joy – there is joy; at a time of mourning – there is mourning”? Are we supposed to sing and forget everything?

Apparently, it is not “in the day” that we rejoice, but rather “in God.” This broadens our perspective: whether You act towards us with mercy and compassion or whether You act with strict justice, we will sing. We will not stop singing: “I found trouble and sorrow; then I called upon the Name of the Lord” (*Tehillim* 116:3-4). It is specifically the Divine attribute of justice that allows us to perceive the Divine attribute of mercy. The boys who fell in battle were not killed as soldiers in foreign armies, nor were they led as sheep to the slaughter, as so many others were. They fell in battle in defense of the renewed Jewish commonwealth, for its existence. Such a commonwealth, such a kingdom, whose ultimate purpose is to bring the world to the consciousness of “God is One and His Name is One,” entails a different path: the path of sacrifices.

In the first meeting between Boaz and Ruth, the mother of the Davidic dynasty, we read, “And Boaz said to her at the mealtime: Come here, and eat of the bread, and dip your morsel in the vinegar” (*Ruth* 2:14). *Chazal* teach, “ ‘Come here (*halom*)’ – the word ‘*halom’* always alludes to kingship… ‘And eat of the bread’ – this is the bread of kingship. ‘And dip your bread in vinegar’ – this refers to suffering” (*Ruth Rabba* 5). Kingship and sovereignty are bound up with suffering. Even before the birth of David, when the very first bud foretelling the kingship of Israel appears, the secret is already revealed.

We, for our part, will sing. We will thank God with full awareness, with acceptance of His judgment. We will not ignore the salvations that He wrought for us during the year, but we will remember the victims. We and others who lived through the terrible hell in Europe, understand very well *Chazal’s* teaching:

“R. Shimon used to say: See how beloved is the land of Israel, and how beautiful. Usually, people who set out to go to war are nimble on their feet, but when they approach the battlefield their legs will barely carry them. But in Israel this is not so. When they came close to the land of Israel their legs carried them, and they said to one another, ‘If we enter the Land of Israel and die right away – is it not worth it for us? For we are entering the place which God promised to our forefathers to give to us.’” (*Sifri Zuta* 10)

This most majestic phenomenon – that after two thousand years of suffering, Jews are killed while fighting, rather than being led like sheep to the slaughter – clarifies the historic turnaround that took place in the wake of the 5th of Iyar, 5708.

Every year, I try convey the sense of “Out of my distress I called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place” (*Tehillim* 118:5) – our emergence from constriction to expanses. But it seems to come across as the recounting of a memory, a personal experience rooted in the distant past.

Sadly, the most elementary, natural layer of the significance of Yom HaAtzma’ut – namely, our freedom as a nation – is fading and being eroded over a long process of decades. Among Jews who are not observant, the 5th of Iyar has become a “nature holiday,” which is celebrated by going out to hike and picnic in natural settings. Religious Jews view the day as the holiday of Eretz Yisrael. To my mind, we have not yet understood the full depth of meaning of this day.

Three messages were conveyed to the world on the 5th of Iyar, 5708: the message of the nation, the message of the land, and the message of the eternity of Israel.

Concerning the nation, for the first time, after two millennia, the Jews in Israel are a community, a *kahal*. This is the voice of freedom, in the full sense of the word, recalling the establishment of Israelite kingship. With regard to the second message, it became clear that Eretz Yisrael – or at least parts of it – had reverted to Jewish ownership. This time, it was not just a matter of opening the gates of the land, with the permission of the world powers, as in the days of Koresh (Cyrus). This time, there was a declaration that the Land of Israel belongs to a Jew no matter where he is, and he can always return to it, to his long-ago home.

The third message pertains to the entire world: there has always been a dream among the nations that “the name of Israel will no longer be remembered” (*Tehillim* 83:5). This aspiration came close to being realized in the Holocaust. And then, with the declaration of the state, came the great shock. The eternal Jewish People rose up: “The righteous man falls seven times, yet rises up again” (*Mishlei* 24:16). In other words – a new era had arrived: the era of *kiddush ha-Shem* (sanctification of God’s Name) in the world.

What is national redemption; what is freedom? Throughout the years of exile, Jews were subjugated on different levels. At times they were denied all legal rights, leaving them on a level lower than that of animals; no non-Jew could be brought to justice for killing a Jew. On the 5th of Iyar, the nation finally understood that there was another reality: redemption.

At the same time, we must remember that the 5th of Iyar falls in between Pesach and Shavuot. Full freedom comes only on Shavuot, with the giving of the Torah. The road is still long, although it has already been paved. As the Zohar teaches, someone who is not truly and fully free cannot serve God fully and wholeheartedly.

For the first time since the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish People took its fate into its own hands. God entrusted the nation with this responsibility, declaring, as it were, “Don’t let the nations decide for you; you decide!”

In the past, some viewed the greatness of Yom HaAtzmaut as lying in the military victory over the Arab states, and this idea began to take hold among Religious Zionist circles, too. This was the source of the dispute as to whether *Hallel* should be recited with or without the blessing; some argued that if we recite *Hallel* on Pesach, over the transition from servitude to freedom, then we must surely give praise over the transition from death to life. But the value of freedom inherent in Yom HaAtzmaut was neglected.

A new generation arose: a generation that had been born free, having no experience of the constriction and oppression of the Jewish People. This generation sought to find content for the 5th of Iyar. And thus, the day became the festival of Eretz Yisrael. The Jews of the Diaspora are happy with this development, because the burning question that faces them – “Where are *we*?” – is pertinent only if the establishment of the state means the beginning of the redemption of the nation. But if it is a day celebrating Eretz Yisrael, which has returned to the hands of the Jewish People, then the Jews living in New York and Paris are equal “shareholders” in this asset.

We must also remember something else. Following the acute severance of Jewish continuity due to the Holocaust, the younger generation is cut off from the roots that nourished its ancestors. This generation has begun investigating everything from the very beginning, with a wretched lack of confidence. If there is no clear instruction in the *Shulchan Arukh* regarding something, they do not know its proper place in their spiritual world. Concerning living in *Eretz Yisrael* there is the famous comment by Ramban, emphasizing the positive commandment for all time. But as for freedom – the *Shulchan Arukh* seems to offer no explicit instruction, and therefore they are perplexed as to its value.

So it was that the day of thanksgiving for Jewish freedom became oriented instead towards the land, in a trend that was strengthened in the wake of the Six Day War. I have already stated that our Zionist belief is not bound up with the question of whether the halakha accords with those who believe that there is a positive commandment to settle Eretz Yisrael in our time, or with those who say there is none. Once a young *talmid chakham* asked me whether Zionism would be acceptable to R. Chaim of Volozhin or Tosafot. I answered that when we discuss great issues, the discussion must be grounded on the broadest possible basis. Even the Rambam, when discussing God’s existence, did not seek to ground his assertion on the creation of the world, because even someone who maintains that the world has always existed will ultimately, necessarily, arrive at an awareness of God’s existence. It is a question of faith. “Don’t you see,” I asked this young man, “that God is leading *Am Yisrael* towards the land? Do you not perceive God’s hand, His providence?”

We are Zionists because we believe that God is bringing *Am Yisrael* back to the land, and that He is setting up Jewish sovereignty. We must come back to the fundamental, elementary, instinctive feeling of thankfulness for our national freedom, and perceive anew the historic dimension of the times in which we live. “The King has brought me into His chambers; we shall be glad and rejoice in You.” The Holy One, blessed be He, has brought us closer to His chambers. Now we must engage in our own soul-searching and recognize that our freedom is the beginning of a path that leads all the way to Shavuot and the acceptance of the Torah.

[This sicha was delivered on Yom HaAtzmaut 5743 (1983).]