Sirens, Songs and Symbols

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Standing silently in the Gush Etzion cemetery, listening to a wailing siren blaring its sad howl across the mountains of history, is one of the most spiritual two minutes of my life as a redeemed Jew. Cramped in a crowded graveyard, surrounded by soldiers and citizens, I feel at one with my people, the bereaved families, and the memories of so many fallen heroes who died "al kiddush Hashem". From schools to office buildings, from highways to farmlands, from supermarkets to beaches, Israelis halt their routine, stand at attention, and quietly ponder Jewish history and the sorrow of our national struggle.

Feeling this national and historical unity and sharing our collective pain feels spiritually uplifting and religiously meaningful. In some ways, this catharsis and spiritual heightening feel oddly similar to my post-Yom Kippur spirituality. It is odd because a siren does not possess any religious source and isn’t anchored to any classical Jewish traditions. The siren belongs to a set of national symbols which our modern state has adopted. Other Yom HaZikaron symbols include military columns, honor guards of soldiers, and laying wreaths of flowers, along with Yom HaAtzma’ut symbols such as military flyovers, lighting torches and outdoor *tiyulim* and mangals. In addition, our people have generated a magnificent playlist of "national" Israeli songs, both melodies of sorrow and tunes of renewal. Though these songs are almost completely bereft of Biblical references, they feel deeply soulful and even spiritual, as they voice our hopes, dreams, longings, sadness, and pride. They may not contain Torah words, but they effuse Jewish *neshama*.

Understandably, many religious Jews are uncomfortable with national symbols bereft of any traditional or religious resonance. Reciting Hallel or chanting Tehillim is one thing, but singing secular lyrics or standing silently during a siren have no religious reference points. If religion lies at the core of our identity shouldn’t all symbols be based solely upon religious rituals or Biblical references?

In part, this is why some Orthodox Jews commemorate the Holocaust on Asara BeTevet through fasting and *selichot* rather than on Yom HaShoah through torch lighting and sirens. For them, religion is the only repository from which symbolism may be drawn. National symbols have no place in the imagination of a religious Jew. We stand silently during *Shemoneh Esrei*, but not during loud sirens. We say *kaddish*, but do not lay wreaths of flowers. We light Shabbat and Havdala candles, but do not light public torches at national ceremonies. If it doesn’t stem from religious roots, it can't be spiritually valid.

The Larger Issue

Validating and internalizing national symbolism forces us to confront a larger issue: for some reason, our final redemption was streamed through secular nationalism. Given the secular nature of our state, it adopted secular imagery common to many nations and unrelated to Judaism. Sirens, flowers, songs are all cross-cultural and international symbols. People around the world stand silently at attention to mark their losses, and they sing wistful songs to express their national longings. There is nothing uniquely Jewish about either.

Ultimately, the question of nationalistic imagery and symbolism raises the larger specter of a *geula* process which evolved from an awakening of secular Jewish nationalism. Why did Hashem decide to redeem us with a secular nationalist movement rather than through a religious revival? Of course, we will only know the answer to that question when redemption concludes, but here are some preliminary thoughts.

The Fall of Religion

The 19th century witnessed the gradual collapse of organized religion. As humanity advanced into the modern era, achieving cultural enlightenment, political democracy and personal freedom, organized religion was cast as the great culprit of human history, responsible for wars, death and the suppression of the human spirit. By popularizing free thought, the 19th century inaugurated the secular city. Darwin, Freud, and others accelerated this religious freefall, ushering in the modern world of secularism and atheism.

Nature abhors a vacuum and so do human beings. As religious identity frayed, something else had to replace it within the human imagination. Traditionally, human identity was forged upon religious belief, but as religious affiliation declined numerous ideologies were conceived to replace it as the basis of identity. Marxism, Capitalism, and Socialism were just a few of the newly emergent ideologies, however it was Nationalism which became the dominant system of thought and identity. For the first time in history, people more deeply identified with their common national heritage than they did with religious traditions and belonging. During the 19th century, for the first time, "Gustav" in Paris defined himself first as a Frenchman, who just happened to be Catholic. Likewise, "John" in London viewed himself primarily as an Englishman, who happened to be Protestant. National identity replaced religious identity and, as the fever of nationalism surged, it stressed the old world order. During the second half of the century Nationalism sparked numerous local wars and, finally, it erupted into WWI - the great war of Nationalism. Over the course of a century, humanity underwent a cultural lobotomy. Religion was no longer popular or authoritative.

The Jewish world was no different. The 19th century witnessed the first mass defection of Jews from classic orthodoxy. In the past, individual Jews had opted out of Jewish religion and destiny, but never before had entire communities willingly abandoned classic orthodox lifestyles. The century of religious collapse caused severe spasms within the Jewish world. New religious denominations such as Conservative and Reform Judaism emerged, each, in its own way, breaking with tradition. Additionally, millions of other Jews became assimilated both within the cosmopolitan European culture as well as within the dusty prairies of the New World.

Millions of Jews were slated for historical oblivion. They had embarked on paths which led them far astray from Jewish religion and, sadly, for many far astray from Jewish identity. Facing historical extinction, they could no longer be captivated by classic religious inspiration. It was not the spirit of the age. Nationalism had replaced it.

A Divine Impulse

At this stage, Hashem evoked an ancient sprit. From the dawn of Jewish history, He had programmed within the Jewish heart the ability to identify with Jewish history, peoplehood and land even in the absence of religious commitment. This primal spirit lay dormant for thousands of years, but was awakened by Hashem in the 19th century, just when history depended upon it. There are millions of Jews whose sole affiliation with Judaism is their love and commitment to the state of Israel. Their nationalistic loyalty is merely the hidden hand of Hashem working though the tapestry of history and human culture, preserving millions of lost Jews for whom religion is no longer compelling. One day, Hashem will step out from behind the screen of history. One day, His unmistakable presence will revive toughened hearts and awaken deadened religious impulses. One day, national identity will provide a platform for religious renewal. Until that day, we continue to participate in national expressions of Jewish pride, and we continue to fuse them to our religious identity.