YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

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**The Miracle and the Responsibility of Sovereignty**

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

## Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. **Miracles by day and miracles by night**

“My heart is prepared, O God; my heart is prepared; I shall sing and I shall give praise.” (*Tehillim* 57:8)

In order to sing, the heart must be ready and prepared. On the verse, “Then sang (literally, ‘will sing’) Moshe…” (*Shemot* 15:1), Rashi comments, “Then it arose in his heart to sing.” In other words, what is notable is not so much the song itself as the desire to sing.

When the event in question is one from the very distant past, such that its significance has been explained and elaborated upon at length by Chazal and other sages throughout the generations, then we are able to sing. But when we are speaking of an event in our own times, when we lack sages with Divine insight who are able to explain its meaning, the situation is different. Throughout the year we are likely to view the State of Israel with a critical eye, and thus it requires a special effort, and profound insight, for the heart to be able to sing over its establishment.

“The day is Yours, the night, too, is Yours; You have prepared the light and the sun.” (*Tehillim* 74:16)

Chazal explain:

“When You perform miracles for us by day, we sing by day; when You perform miracles for us by night, we sing by night.” (*Bereishit Rabba* 6:2)

Sometimes the song is “by day” – singing over clear, unequivocal miracles that leave no room for misunderstanding, for questions and doubts. Our singing is thus also “by day.” But there are also miracles that occur “by night” – when not everything is clear, and there are shadows – and then we sing “by night.” In describing the song at the Red Sea, Chazal teach:

“How did they utter song? The infant lay upon his mother’s knees and the suckling sucked at his mother’s breast; when they beheld the Divine Presence, the infant raised his neck and the suckling released the nipple [from his mouth], and they exclaimed: ‘This is my God…’”

This was song that required no explanations. We await miracles “by day,” but even when the miracles are only “by night,” we sing and give praise to God.

1. **From slavery to freedom**

“A person is obligated to regard himself as though he came out of Egypt.” (Pesach Haggada)

When we try to grasp the meaning of the salvation of the Jewish people as a whole, Chazal demand that each person view it from an individual perspective as well. Out of his own feelings and contemplation, he may perhaps come to grasp a sense of the nation as a whole and its salvation.

The initial sense on Yom Ha-atzma’ut is, of course, a sense of having emerged “from slavery to freedom.” This is also the first foundation of our song and praise – the fact that we have emerged from slavery to freedom. I doubt that there are many among you who have experienced slavery, and obviously anyone who has no memory of slavery cannot fully experience freedom. [As a Holocaust survivor,] I view myself personally as a “*shaliach tzibbur*” tasked with conveying the meaning of slavery from a first-hand perspective.

A slave is a person with no legal rights; a slave is like a piece of furniture in the hands of his master. Just as a person may break a chair that he owns – the chair cannot sue him – so a slave has no rights. His masters treat him as they wish, and there is no court, no police force, that will intervene. This is slavery. In my generation, a great number of Jews experienced this sense of slavery. For a Jew there was no law and justice, no rights; he was nothing more than… a Jew.

But slavery is not the worst of all worlds. “Yet if we had [merely] been sold as bondmen and bondwomen, I would have remained silent” (*Esther* 7:4). Slavery can sometimes provide a measure of security. An owner is usually interested in maintaining his property. If his slave produces some benefit, then his master will maintain him as he maintains a dog or a donkey, with the expectation of gaining some benefit from them. However, the situation in Egypt, the situation in exile, was one of slavery with no security.

A person who merits salvation from that slavery to freedom is surely overflowing with praise to God. I am not certain that this feeling can be conveyed to those who did not experience servitude, but there is a different sense that may perhaps be conveyed.

1. **“He has delivered me, for He has delighted in me”**

To illustrate, I will share some of my personal experiences in Europe during those difficult times.

We were a group of yeshiva students, and we accepted God’s will. If God wanted us to perish in sanctification of His name, so be it. I do not remember feeling fear, except on two occasions: one was during an American bombardment of the Germans, where we were also in danger. The other was when we were forced to dig trenches under Russian fire, on the Russian front. To be killed as a Jew – that was our fate, but to be hit by a stray bullet that was not aimed at a Jewish target – that struck fear in us.

Today, in most places in the world Jews go about freely. But nowhere in the world do we go about freely *as Jews*. A Jew may go about freely *despite* the fact that he is a Jew. Here in Israel is the only place where a Jew is free because he is a Jew. This is a great thing! A person who lives a profound life, one who experiences life to its depths, is able to sense the significance of this. This sense may encompass even those who were never themselves enslaved.

A person might ask, what is so special about this? A person of any nation can go about freely in his own country! But for us, it is different – as the *Kuzari* explains:

“They [the nations] deteriorated, became disobedient, and wicked; yet no fire fell down from heaven upon them, nor any sudden plague… and when their heart was destroyed – by which I mean the temple towards which they prayers would be directed – no change was effected in them; if there was any change, it was only in their being great or small in number, relatively stronger or weaker, having discord or unity prevalent among them – all in accordance with natural causes and happenstance. But as for us – when our heart – our Temple – was destroyed, we ourselves were struck, and when our heart is restored, we too will be healed, whether we are many or few, and whatever our situation at the time may be. For He Who formed us is the living God.” (II, 32)

If God gives us freedom, it is a sign that “God desires His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation” (*Tehillim* 149:4), and this is a great thing. We must know that Jewish survival in the world is not to be taken for granted. According to all the laws of history, the Jewish people should long since have disappeared – no other nation and people has survived from biblical times until the present. Our existence goes against the laws of history. The return to our land after two thousand years is a historical absurdity.

I remember when Prime Minister Golda Meir visited the Gush Etzion communities. At a meeting that was held after her tour, people asked her why Israel did not engage in better public relations (*hasbara*) overseas. She replied: “You don’t understand our problem. The gentiles are incapable of understanding us – not because of faulty public relations, but because our entire enterprise here is absurd. A person has to be Jewish to understand our *hasbara*.” For our many sins, the Jewish youth of today who are removed from Torah have the same trouble understanding what Golda Meir deemed incomprehensible to non-Jews.

There are two sources for Jewish survival in the world, based on two verses. First:

“And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away, nor will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God.” (*Vayikra* 26:44)

Second:

“Then the Lord your God will return your captivity, and have compassion upon you, and will return and gather you from all the nations amongst whom the Lord your God has scattered you.” (*Devarim* 30:3)

Just two verses. Without them, there would be no Jewish existence anywhere. If we exist not by right of the first (“when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away … to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them”), then all we are left with to explain our presence here is the second (“the Lord your God will return your captivity”). Despite the reality of the State of Israel, which is lacking in many areas that we hold dear, nevertheless our presence here is a realization of “the Lord desires His people.”

The recognition of the State of Israel by the nations of the world should also not be taken for granted. Such recognition is one of the primary foundations of the prophetic promise, “And all nations shall affirm you, for you shall be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts” (*Malakhi* 3:12).

All the miracles that accompanied the establishment of the state in 1948, and those that have accompanied its existence since then, are all manifestations of “He has delivered me from my strong enemies… He has delivered me, for He has delighted in me” (II *Shemuel* 22:18-20). A person must be deaf if he traverses the roads of Israel without hearing an echo of the promise,

“You shall no more be called ‘Forsaken,’ neither shall your land any more be called ‘Desolate;’ but you shall be called ‘Cheftzi-bah’ (My delight is in her), and your land espoused.” (*Yishayahu* 62:4)

1. **Messianism and rationality**

All of the above expresses the prophetic, messianic dimension of our existence – for we have no existence without the prophetic promise. The freedom that we breathe is the foundation of a great future, where “God shall be King over all the earth; on that day God shall be One, and His Name – One” (*Zekharia* 14:9); this is the messianic element. And hence the protest against those who have caused the messianic issue to become hateful, those “who have insulted the footsteps of Your anointed” (*Tehillim* 89:52) by distorting the concept of the Messiah, such that a great portion of the public today keeps far from any mention of him. What is the significance of an independent state in the process of redemption? The Rambam succinctly describes the coming of the Messiah as follows:

“But ‘the days of the Messiah’ will be realized in this world, and the world will continue to function as usual, only that Israel will regain its sovereignty.” (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 9:2)

What is the meaning of “Jewish sovereignty”?

1. It is a return to world history. Judaism becomes once again a phenomenon of this world that draws everyone’s attention. This entails responsibility for what the nations will learn from the Jewish state.
2. Jewish sovereignty means that the nation is responsible for its fate. And this entails enormous responsibility on the part of Israel’s leaders. Every step that they take must be weighed very carefully.

The Zohar (*Shemot* 7b) teaches that the Messiah dwells in “the palace of a birds’ nest.” Rav Kook (*Iggerot*, #332) explains that this represents a potential that we must reveal and actualize. This is the messianic aspect of our existence. Messianism does not exempt us from weighing political, military and economic factors, with a profound calculation of what is best for the Jewish people for generations to come. This is the great responsibility of Jewish sovereignty. Someone who interprets messianism as liberation from all worldly considerations, is distorting the concept. One can understand someone who proposes waiting passively for the messiah and refraining from any action, but to suggest that we can and should act, without consideration for the results of our actions with regard to the Jewish people in Israel and in the Diaspora, religious and non-religious alike – this is a distortion.

Likewise the mystical element. One who tries to understand Jewish history without its hidden, mystical aspect is blind and foolish, but to claim that Jewish history is a purely mystical and supernatural matter, freeing us of rational considerations, is distorting Jewish history. The mystical element assures the ultimate aim, the purpose, of the State of Israel. But the question of whether the road will be short or, God forbid, long; if it will be straight or full of turns and bends; if it will be peaceful or, God forbid, blood-soaked – all of this is up to us. We bear a great responsibility up until “the liberators shall ascent Mount Zion to judge the mountain of Esav” (*Ovadia* 1:21). Yom Ha-atzma’ut must be a day of soul-searching, of spiritual accounting, of contemplating the clarifying the nature of the Divine gift that we have been given – the independent State of Israel.

1. **True Religious Zionism**

Rav Kook taught us that where there is no king, the laws of sovereignty apply to the public leadership. This is not the place for an in-depth discussion of these definitions, but what he means is that all the authority of the king passes to the elected leadership of the nation. In governing the State of Israel, nothing is clear-cut and self-evident; every step is clouded with doubt and questions. This helps us understand the Rambam’s assertion that even when it comes to a *milchemet mitzva* – a war of defense, or one that is required by the Torah – the *Urim ve-Tumim* are consulted.

My teacher and father-in-law, Rav Zvi Yehuda Meltzer *zt”l*, once consulted the Chazon Ish concerning a difficult educational problem that had arisen in the place where he was serving as rabbi. The Chazon Ish replied that he must make the decision himself, since he possessed the *siyata diShemaya*, theDivine aid, that is awarded to a *posek* with regard to questions concerning his community. That same “Divine aid” is what helps the leadership and gives them the strength to arrive at their decisions. It is a very serious matter when individuals assume responsibility for actions that have ramifications for the whole of Israel, without the “Divine aid” that belongs to the national leadership.

A precondition for salvation and the inheritance of the land through peaceful means is the trait of humility: “For God desires His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation” (*Tehillim* 149:4); “the humble will inherit the land, and shall delight in the abundance of peace” (*Tehillim* 37:11). We must reject the phenomenon of young people who announce brazenly, “We are leading Am Yisrael.” Who gave them that mandate? Who authorized them to decide who is a “traitor” Am Yisrael and who are “fools”? Articles are published and *halakhot* are ruled upon in this area by people who are not fit to rule on matters of meat and milk, not to mention the freeing of an *aguna* (a “chained” woman, whose husband refuses to grant her a divorce). “Halakhic rulings” are issued on the basis of chapters of Tanakh, or a “*vort*” (a homiletic teaching on the Torah) – and these rulings are set in conflict with the State! Where is their humility? Why do they not consult with the leading Torah authorities? What shall we say of people who are punctilious about “*tevel de-rabbanan*” but are not concerned about killing a non-Jew since, according to some opinions, this is an offense punishable only by the Heavenly court?

From a psychological point of view, we are seeing frustration amongst the religious youth, which for many years has felt itself dragging at the heels of the secular youth in the building up of the country. The sudden sense of, “Now we have an opportunity to lead Zionist activity,” has led the youth to extremism.

One of the dangerous “*kelipot*” (husks) of secular Zionism was the brazen Sabra rejection of the exilic Jew: “We stand upright; everything in exile was done out of weakness.” After a few wars, and the disaster at the Munich Olympics, they stopped talking about Jews having been “led like sheep to the slaughter.” But now our own religious public is starting to denigrate “exilic existence.” The claim is made that “Today we have to talk in a different style, standing tall, in a tone of redemption.” How careful rabbis and other Jewish leaders were throughout the ages not to say things before the nations of the world that were better left unsaid! Who has handed over responsibility to those who are ready to publicize strange and distorted theories about Jewish attitudes toward non-Jews? There are still Jews living among the nations! The State of Israel belongs to the Jewish people as a whole, not just to those who are able to vote for the Knesset. Each step we take must be carefully weighed in terms of its ramifications for Jews the world over.

We find ourselves in a period where secular Zionism is in crisis. On the other hand, the religious Zionist camp is also beginning to propound a distorted Torah. The teachings of Rav Kook are being distorted – or actually not being studied at all, or people are not studying their meaning in depth. We must raise the banner of true religious Zionism. Two dangers face us: on the one hand, the secular public is beginning to turn its back on Eretz Yisrael; on the other hand, the religious public is overemphasizing Eretz Yisrael at the expense of other values. We must make clear our true position. A person who suffices merely with our right to all of the Land of Israel, has no portion in the Torah! On the other hand, we must recognize the great responsibility entailed in each step that we take and pray for Divine aid, never saying, “We alone are right; everyone else is wrong, they are all fools, they are all traitors.” If we believe that the government of Israel is making a mistake, there is only one path open to us: to try to exert influence by acceptable democratic means.

1. **Jews in Israel and Jews in the Diaspora**

For our many sins, many Jews in the Diaspora know nothing of their religious heritage. We must give them a source of inspiration that will draw them toward Judaism. The State of Israel is the only vessel that can achieve this, until the Holy One, blessed be He, imbues all with a heavenly spirit and we recognize His Kingship. The hierarchy of values set by the inhabitants of Israel is what will determine how Israel is viewed by the Jews of the Diaspora and what its educational value for them will be. This demands very intensive work. Voting for some or other party in the Kenesset will not solve the problem. The question is, what is of supreme value to us in Israel – material good or the general good?

At the same time, when it comes to Diaspora Jews – especially those who develop ideologies that ignore the Land of Israel and its inhabitants – we must say: If this land is suffering, it is the result of your sins, too. The Land of Israel belongs to the Jewish People as a whole, and you, too, bear responsibility. Those who cannot understand such a message can learn it from the non-Jews. When a non-Jew – or a Jew, for that matter – takes up the struggle against Zionism, they are actually against Jews wherever they may be, in New York or in Memphis. Today it is not considered polite or acceptable to be antisemitic, so people are “anti-Zionist” instead. For non-Jews it is the same thing. If the State of Israel has not achieved what it should have, the reason is – as the *Kuzari* explains:

“Indeed, O king of the Khazars, you have found my reproach! It is this sin which kept the Divine promise with regard to the Second Temple, ‘Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion’ (*Zekharia* 2:10), from being fulfilled. Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at the outset, if they had all answered the call and willingly consented to return. But only some were ready to do so, while the majority, and the aristocracy, remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and subjugation, so long as they would not need to part with their houses and their affairs… Therefore God treated them in accordance with their own small-mindedness, and the Divine promises were fulfilled for them only in limited measure, in accordance with their measly interest. For Divine Providence only gives man as much as he is prepared to receive; if his receptive capacity be small, he obtains little, and much if it be great.” (II:24)

We are entrusted with the task of strengthening people’s confidence in the continued existence of the State of Israel. Israel is not a transient episode. For “God’s word is forever, and not a single word of His [utterance] will return unfulfilled.” Had the state been a human creation, the work of Ben Gurion and his comrades, it could have been a transient phenomenon. But it is a Divine work, the fulfillment of a prophetic vision, and we must say this openly.

We pray each and every day, “Cause speedily the branch of David to sprout.” The “branch” is the Messiah. Admittedly, right now it is a poor, sickly, thin and weak branch, but it is alive and breathing, and it will prevail!

[This sicha was delivered on Yom Ha-atzma'ut 5744 (1984).]