**The State of Israel as the Realization of the Prophetic Visions**

*A sicha delivered on Israel’s 50th Yom HaAtzmaut*

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I have had the privilege of reciting *Hallel* on *Yom Ha-Atzma’ut* fifty times, and this year, God willing, I will do so for the 51st time. Usually, I quote the verse, “I will give thanks to You, for You have answered me and have become my salvation” (*Tehillim* 118:21), but this year I will add the verse, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity” (*Vayikra* 25:23). Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, explains: “This is meant as a prohibition, which necessitates the return of fields to their owners in the *Yovel* (Jubilee) year.” In other words, endurance for longer than fifty years is considered endurance in perpetuity – forever.

The joy that Jews felt at the time of the declaration of the state can still, I believe, be appreciated today. However, I doubt that the young people of today are capable of identifying with and understanding the cry of “We pray You, O Lord – save us!” (*Tehillim* 118:25), which also accompanied us at that time. The decision to establish the state passed with a very modest majority; the Arabs pounced on us from all sides, and in 1948 we prayed with all our hearts that God would indeed save us.

Today, the situation is the opposite of that described in the Book of Ezra, from the period of the building of the Second Temple. There, the elders who still remembered the glory of the First Temple wept, while the young people rejoiced. Today, the elders who remember the terrible destruction of the Holocaust rejoice over the Jubilee itself, the very fact of fifty years of existence of the Jewish state, while the younger generation seeks out additional reasons to celebrate. Thank God we have merited that which many previous generations did not: “for the sound [of the celebration] was heard from afar” (*Ezra* 3:13).

The coming of the Mashiach is a principle of Jewish faith. The kernel of this idea has been transformed from a vage and abstract belief into clear and concrete knowledge that imbues *Yom Ha-Atzma’ut* with historical and meta-historical significance.

The Rambam writes, “In the future, the King Mashiach will arise and renew the dynasty of David, restoring it to its initial sovereignty” (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:1). Yet this cannot happen until the Jewish People return to their land. We might say, then, that the seed from which the messianic vision sprouts is our return to the Land of Israel. All the rest is details, concerning which the Rambam says, “No one can know how this will come about until it comes about” (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 12:2).

With our own eyes we see a process that is undeniably taking place. It is no longer a matter of belief; it has become knowledge. Even Christianity was forced to change its theology in order to accommodate the Jewish People’s historical return to the land.

It is specifically in light of the power of this certainty that religious Jewry, in all of its various subgroupings, is faced with new challenges of faith. How are we to accommodate this new reality within our approach to Jewish life and faith? For example, the Charedi world-view faces the following challenges.

1. Much of the prophetic vision of the future is unfolding before our very eyes:

“So 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 for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.” (*Zekharia* 8:4)

Can we possibly ignore such tremendous developments and carry on with our lives as though nothing unusual is happening? Some parts of the Charedi public seem blind to the spiritual and historical significance of the great events taking place in our time.

1. In the Book of Ezra we read that the return from Babylon at God’s command comprised 40,000 Jews. Today, with more than four million Jews in Israel – including more than 400,000 who are Torah-observant – can one possibly regard the establishment of the state as “an act of Satan,” as certain groups do?[[1]](#footnote-1) Surely the belief that forces of evil in the world have such power is, in and of itself, a form of blasphemy or idolatry, as Ramchal asserts in his letters.

At the same time, Religious Zionism faces its own religious challenges:

1. While a great part of the prophetic vision has indeed been realized, we cannot help but ask, Where is the Jewish People’s spiritual awakening? “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (*Yishayahu* 60:1) – where is God’s glory?
2. Rav Kook spoke of the “beginning of the redemption” in the early twentieth century, and the disciples of the Vilna Gaon had a similar message many years before that. But since then, the Holocaust took place. How does the Holocaust fit in with the vision of the “beginning of the redemption?”

The return of the people to the land – even without a spiritual awakening – is surely part of the process of redemption. Can a partial realization of the prophetic vision, prior to the return of the Divine Presence to Jerusalem, be considered a process of redemption?

According to the Rambam, the answer to this question is yes. He writes that R. Akiva and all the sages of his generation viewed Ben Koziba (Bar Kokhba) as the Mashiach – even though, with the exception of restored Jewish sovereignty, none of the prophetic promises were fulfilled. However, if we were to fashion our attitude towards the state according to the precedent of Bar Kokhba, there would be no guarantee that it would lead to a redemption that is complete and eternal. Bar Kokhba’s rule survived for only a few years.

In order to understand the difference between our times and the period of Bar Kokhba, we must look deeply into what the Rambam is saying:

“Do not imagine that the King Mashiach must perform signs and wonders and create new things in the world, or resurrect the dead, or the like. This is not so: after all, R. Akiva was one of the greatest Sages of the Mishna, and he was a supporter of Ben Koziba, the king, and he would refer to him as the King Mashiach. He and all the sages of his generation believed him to be the King Mashiach – until he was killed because of his sins; once he was killed, they realized that he was not. The Sages never asked him for any sign or wonder.

The essence of the matter is that the Torah, its statutes and its laws are eternal and everlasting; we may not add to them nor detract from them…

And if a king arises from the house of David, who studies the Torah and engages in the commandments, like David, his ancestor, in accordance with the Written Law and the Oral Law, and he compels all of Israel to follow [the path of Torah] and to fortify the breaches in its observance, and he fights the wars of God, he may be considered to be Mashiach. If he succeeds in the above and is victorious over all the nations around, and builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, then he is assuredly Mashiach.” (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:3-4)

Bar Kokhba achieved none of this. How, then, could the Sages have considered him to be Mashiach? The explanation is quite simple: at a time when nothing of the prophetic vision had yet been fulfilled and there was no Jewish sovereignty, all of the conditions enumerated by the Rambam would have to be fulfilled: the candidate would have to be a Torah scholar, etc. In the time of Bar Kokhba these conditions were lacking – but Jewish sovereignty was restored and became a fact; and Jewish sovereignty, according to the Rambam, is a messianic phenomenon, and facts cannot be denied. Therefore R. Akiva regarded Bar Kokhba as Mashiach, with the hope that all the prophetic promises would be fulfilled as time went on. After the rebellion was crushed by the Roman legions, it became clear that this brief period of glory had not been a messianic phenomenon.

In our time, our situation is far better. Not only has Jewish sovereignty been restored, but many of the prophetic promises have been fulfilled: the land gives forth its fruit, and the dispersed of Israel have been gathered in. R. Akiva saw a single fact before him – and was unable to ignore or deny it. We face many facts that R. Akiva could only have dreamed of, and we, too, must not ignore or deny them, especially not as Israel celebrates its Jubilee year.

From this point onwards, we are in the stage of “*tzemitut*,perpetuity.” We are certain that the Holy One, blessed be He, will guide us to the coming of Mashiach – may it be speedily in our days. At the same time, we are still at an early stage, and cannot be certain that the next stage will follow quickly.

The midrash teaches, “The wicked are considered dead even in their lifetime – for they see the sun when it rises, but fail to recite the blessing, ‘Who creates light…’” (*Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vezot Haberakha*, 7). A person who is alive must respond to reality. We must see that despite our present situation, one of “youths [celebrating] from their feasts of song,” we are progressing towards a time when we shall hear “the voice of those saying, Praise the Lord of hosts,” as the prophet Yirmiyahu foretold:

“Thus says the Lord: Again there shall be heard in this place, which you say is ruined, without man or beast – in the cities of Judea and the streets of Jerusalem that are desolate, without men, without inhabitants and without beasts – the sound of joy and the sound of happiness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those saying, ‘Praise the Lord of Hosts, for the Lord is good, for His mercy endures forever,’ as they bring sacrifices of thanksgiving to the House of God. For I shall bring back the captivity of the land as in the past, says the Lord.” (Yirmiyahu 33:10-11)

We must rejoice on this day. Let us hear the sounds of the voices emanating from the cities that are no longer “desolate, without men, without inhabitants,” the “sound of joy and the sound of happiness.” Let us hear the sounds of the dancing arising from the Land of Israel, as it is written, “This day which the Lord has made; *nagila ve-nismecha vo*” – we shall rejoice and be glad not only *vo*, in the day, but mainly *Vo* – in Him, in the Holy One who has redeemed us (*Tehillim* 118:24).

(This *sicha* was delivered on Yom Ha-Atzma’ut 5758 [1998].)

1. Ed. note: Now, of course, the numbers are even higher. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)