YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Yom Ha-atzmaut**

**The Continuing Significance of Yom Ha-Atzmaut**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Baruch Gigi**

Adapted by Shaul Barth

Translated by David Strauss

The accepted model for establishing days of rejoicing and thanksgiving is Chanuka and Purim. Regarding Purim, it is stated in the book of *Esther*: "every year" (9:21), and later in the chapter it is stated: "to confirm this second letter of Purim" (9:29). The Gemara in *Megila* (7a) discusses the meaning of the words: "to confirm this second letter of Purim," and says: "At first they decreed the observance of Purim in Shushan, but afterwards throughout the world." According to this, after the establishment of the observance of Purim, an attempt was made to expand the enactment, a discussion took place about the matter, and in the end, the decision was reached to execute the plan. Later in the same passage, it is stated: "Rabbi Elazar taught: *Esther* was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit… they confirmed above what they took upon themselves below." And in the continuation, there is another opinion: "Rabbi Yosef said: From here…'And these days of Purim shall not fail from among the Jews… Nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.'" Regarding Chanuka we find something similar. The passage in tractate *Shabbat* (21b)that deals with Chanuka relates the entire story of Chanuka, and states at the end: "The following year these [days] were appointed a festival with [the recital of] *Hallel* and thanksgiving." This wording implies that initially there was no formal establishment of a festival for all generations, and that only in the following year was such a festival enacted.

For every historical event, there are two perspectives: There is the perspective of the people who were in distress and then rescued from it, the feeling of coming out of death to life and out of exile to redemption; and there is also the long-term perspective. At the moment that the event occurs, the people break out into song for their very salvation. That is not the time to consider whether it is indeed appropriate to establish a holiday for the deliverance. What is important at that time is that the people were saved and that they should express their thanksgiving. We are dealing with a song for that moment. I have mentioned on several occasions that *Chazal* said (*Sanhedrin* 94a) that "the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Chizkiyahu as the messiah, and Sancheriv as Gog and Magog," but in the end this did not happen because Chizkiyahu did not utter a song. It is possible that an analysis of that event would lead to the conclusion that it was inappropriate to celebrate this rescue, for the kingdom of Israel had already been exiled and the rescue was only of Jerusalem. However, the Gemara's criticism is not that they did not establish a festival for that salvation, but that they did not utter a song, that is to say, that they did not offer thanksgiving at the time of the deliverance, without overthinking the matter.

We all know that on the 5th of Iyar, 5708 [1948], at the moment that the establishment of the State of Israel was proclaimed, the people took to the streets to sing and dance, even though a war had broken out, and it was only "the following year" that the Chief Rabbinate convened and established a day of praise and thanksgiving. It seems to me that the meaning of Yom Ha-Atzmaut has changed over the years. Initially the rejoicing was for the very independence of the people of Israel. But in the wake of the great miracles that the people experienced in the Six Day War and the feeling of deliverance that was felt in all of Israel in the wake of those victories, when we returned to all parts of Eretz Israel, the people began to feel that the "lover" was, quite literally, "standing behind our wall," and this feeling of imminent redemption particularly suffused the religious Zionist public, which increasingly took action to bring about this reality. In some cases, these activists felt that usual, pragmatic, political-historical considerations were no longer relevant because the messiah was on our doorstep.

When progress towards the grand redemptive vision was called into question by the Oslo process and particularly the Disengagement from Gaza, some of these activists began to call into question the significance of the State of Israel and the need to celebrate Yom Ha-Atzamut. Fortunately, the latter voices were relatively marginal, but nevertheless I feel the need to express some basic truths, less this troubling view become more widespread.

We have been privileged in our times to return and establish a sovereign state in Eretz Israel. I believe with absolute faith in accordance with the words of *Chazal* that all of these occurrences are an important stage in the process of the redemption of the people of Israel. We have merited an unparalleled ingathering of the exiles from all four corners of the earth. There is almost not a Jew in the world who cannot immigrate to and settle in Israel. We have merited building a Torah center in Israel, the likes of which has never before existed, through which is fulfilled: "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (*Yeshayahu* 2:3). We have merited that the establishment of the State of Israel and the connection of world Jewry to it has preserved a spark of Jewish identity even among those who are far from Torah and *mitzvot*. We have merited building the land and causing its deserts to bloom. It is true that in recent years the Jewish image of the state has been damaged on various fronts for various reasons, and it is true that many Israelis do not value living in Eretz Israel as the land of God's inheritance, and it is true that the prevailing cultural perception of the West and of the global village threatens to take control of Israeli society. However, one who believes that we are dealing here with a great Divine process must understand that this process is a challenge that we must face.

The way to confront this great challenge is out of a sense of societal unity. God redeems the nation, not just individuals. On other occasions, I have developed the idea that that the institutions in the biblical kingdom of Israel were functional, whereas in the kingdom of Judah (when ruled by the house of David) they constituted “God's throne in this world.” Until now we have merited realizing the functionality of the kingdom of Israel, but we have not yet reached the level of the kingdom of the house of David. This is the great challenge that confronts us. We must internalize the meaning of a state that strives to be the place where we can fully realize the principles and values ​​of the Torah. We must work toward building a society on the foundations of law and justice, on expanding the community of Torah scholars and Jewish values. Here too there is an increase in the sparks of light, seeing that there is a growing sector of the population that is interested in connecting to Jewish culture. I recently met a group of non-religious kibbutz educators who run groups working toward establishing a more just society. At the same time that they expressed criticism of certain trends within the religious community and Israeli society as a whole, they also lamented that their own social action groups are not sufficiently connected to Jewish sources. They expressed the desire to increase commitment to Jewish sources and Jewish culture. The very willingness to connect to a particular spiritual system is a blessed development.

All our aspirations should be should be considered from the holistic perspective of carrying the yoke by the whole nation, internalizing the full meaning of living in Israel while continually trying to deepen this perception among the general public, which is the basis for establishing a society of truth and justice. All this for the fulfillment of the words of the prophet: "Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return to her with righteousness" (*Yeshayahu* 1:27). To place the redemption of the people before the redemption of the land – without forgetting the redemption of the land but rather putting it in its proper place in terms of our scale of values – and to internalize that God has given the land to the people of Israel, not to a particular community. If we fail to internalize this point, I fear that religious Zionism will degenerate to the point that in the coming years there will be many who will ask: "What have we to do with this state?" The security challenges facing the people of Israel in the near future, with the formation of a new government, will be several times more difficult than those we have experienced in the past. If we fail to understand the mission facing us at this time in the present reality and with the people as they are, we are liable to find ourselves in a much more difficult situation, and then it will be much harder to say although there are difficulties we must nevertheless express our gratitude. If we base society on concern for the weak and the pursuit of justice, and establish a spiritual focus within our routine activities, we will one day be able to settle all parts of Israel, the land of God, in peace and quiet.

We come today with a more sober outlook. At this time, we need to analyze reality and understand that the kingdom of heaven may not yet have been revealed in full force, but our aspiration is that "the Lord will reign forever and ever." Let us pray that we find favor, grace and goodness in the eyes of God and man.

[This sicha was delivered on Yom Ha-Atzmaut 5766 (2006).]