

Yom Ha'atzmaut 5775

This Wednesday night and Thursday we are celebrating the 67th Anniversary of the State of Israel. And I think it only correct to examine what does Israel mean to me as a thinking Jew.

By that- I do not mean whether or not it is a great place to take a vacation or do some business.

Let me explain:

“VeAvraham avar baaretz”- Abraham passed in the land-

It doesn't say that Abraham passed through the land but Ba-aretz in the land- even though he was only passing through he passed in it.

Rabbi Zev Leff explains: You disembark from the plane in Israel, you get into your Hawaiiin shorts and flag down a taxi to take you to a hotel in Tel Aviv and spend the next two weeks sunning yourself on the beach. Or, you get off the plane in Israel and get a taxi to Yerushalayim or one of our holy cities and spend the time at the Kotel and visiting some of the holy sites. That is the difference between passing through the land or VeAvraham Avar Baaretz Passing in the land- Taking in the land, its history its meaning; making the land itself permeate and affect you.

A critique by a friend who recently returned from Eilat was the fact that in the hotel in which he stayed out of a possible 200 guests- only 4 people lit their Shabbat candles. And most of the people in the hotel were Jewish. So here you are in our Holy Land, but there are Jews who don't feel it and are only moved in a secular way.

I want to assess what does Israel mean to me; what religious meaning do I see in Israel.

In my prayers every day I devote a good portion to the concept of redemption. We ask G-d in the Amidah every weekday for the following:

The restoration of our judges like former times.

The rebuilding of your Holy City Jerusalem and its Temple.

The ingathering of the exiles dispersed throughout the world.

The Bringing of The Maschiach Speedily in our days and

And may our eyes witness Your return to Zion in compassion.

All these themes are part of the ingrained psyche of the Jew. All of them aspects of redemption dependant on one another. For example one could not expect the ingathering of the exiles if you do not have an Israel to which to return.

And these themes pre 1948 were utopian dreams, but today they are becoming part of our reality.

I think you can divide the Orthodox response to modern day Israel into three main views:

The first reaction to Israel is that you cannot have a Secular State until Maschiach comes. It is G-d alone who brings the redemption- and who are we to push our luck with Hashem?

Completely the opposite the setting up of a State of Israel has been a setback to the coming of Maschiach. The main people who were engaged in the State's Creation were secular irreligious or anti religious Jews. Indeed there is a Talmudic discussion in Gemara Ketubot 111 about three oaths that G-d adjured with Israel as they went into gallut-exile- one of which was that Israel should not go back to their land before Maschiach comes with force.

The Gemara says in the name of Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai that if people come to you in the town and tell you that Maschiach is here and you are in the middle of planting a tree, first plant your tree, then go to greet him.

The rationale is that first we've got to do what we've got to do, then after that Maschiach will come, but not before and you cannot push the coming before its time.

You can take this view to its logical conclusion: Israel is an obstacle to redemption by the fact that it is a secular state, therefore Israel is wrong. Since the Jews are not supposed to be in Israel anyway before Maschiach comes, therefore we should side with the Arabs against Israel and go back to the pre Zionist days. That is the extreme view of Neturei Karta.

But most Chareidi Jews do not go down that road. Israel exists, therefore we have to work with it and come to an accommodation with it- even though it is a Zionist secular state.

The problems with this position are the following: How can you ignore what happened in 1948 and 1967 indeed through all the wars in Israel. How can you turn your back on this and say that there is not a Divine element here? How can you not see the Hand of Hashem in Israel? And also: How can you not see the good of Israel in the fact that there are more people today in Israel learning and practising Torah in the land than at any other time in our history?

The second reaction is the complete opposite: The view of Rav Kook and his followers: Israel is the fulfilment of the Messianic dream. For thousands of years we have been waiting for this moment of redemption and now it has come- and therefore it is Reishit tzemichat Geulateinu- the beginning of the flowering of our redemption and itchalta digeula- the beginning of the redemption. This is it and we slowly all have to realise that we have been redeemed.

In the words of the Talmud: redemption is like the morning dawn, the light of the sun comes up unhurriedly, so too salvation goes through a slow process of redemption, bit by bit.

A Channel four film a few years ago of some Jews in Judaea and Samaria and the woman interviewed looked out over her beautiful land and said:

“This is my maschiach!” - she actually saw redemption, geulah in the land.

But there are problems with this stance as well:

Look at Israel- look at its problems. Look at the fact that we had the disengagement from Gaza a few years ago; a setback to redemption. But look at the tensions between the Ashkenazim and the sefardim, the Charedim and the Chilonim- the Jews and the Arabs- hardly a Messianic utopian dream. Israel has its problems therefore it cannot be the final fulfilment of the Messianic dream.

The third reaction is I believe the middle ground between the two, and it is the one that really holds water.

You cannot deny that Israel is the greatest thing that has happened to the Jewish people since the destruction of the Temple 1930 years ago. You cannot refute that.

Jews are able to live in freedom in their own land. In the words of the Hatikvah: Liheyot am chofshi beartzeinu- To be a free people in our land. But with that freedom comes responsibility- the Jews left Egypt- gained freedom, but fifty days later received the Torah at Sinai- lihyot am chofshi- to be a free people means the freedom to live our lives as Jews ought to live their lives - beartzienu- in our land.

But this is not maschiach yet- this is not true redemption. Israel has too many problems from within and without-We still need to work a little bit more on ourselves to bring Maschiach. We have to find unity and respect among the Jewish people.

Last week in Shul on Yom Hashoah I spoke about the four silences of the holocaust-

And I mentioned the silence of G-d-we cried out to Him- but we heard nothing

But maybe we look back – Israel is G-d’s response