

Yom Ha'atzmaut

- Nisson Shulman.

The miracle of our survival. Karev yom asher hu lo yom velo layla, the mixed messages of the time approaching geulah. Rabbi Hiyyah Rabba veRabbi Shimon bar Chalafta and the dawn in the valley of Arbel. So the Geulah will come, at first gradually, then faster and faster. Who were the early Zionists? Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalisher? Rabbi Yehuda Shlomo Alkalai? The students of the Gaon of Vilna who made aliya? or the Kabbalists of Tzefat? or Ramban? or Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi? or the 300 Tosafists who settled in Acco during the time of the Crusades? or rather the first Jew into exile with a Sefer Torah in his hands, looking back with the words, "Im eshkachech Yerushalayim tishkach yemini..."

YOM HAATZMAUT

Today is Yom Haatzmaut, the Fifth of Iyar, though we celebrated it earlier to avoid Hillul Shabbat.

1. SURVIVAL:

When Titus led the defeated Jewish heroes under the Arch of Triumph in Rome, coins were thrown to the Roman people on which were inscribed the words, Judea Capta, Judea Davicta, "Judea is captured, Judea is destroyed". The remains of that Arch are still standing in Old Rome, but there are no longer any Romans left to gaze at that arch and rejoice. They have gone the way of the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the ancient Greeks - but the Jew lives on, and for two thousand years no Jew willingly walked under that arch, until 1948 - when the Jews of Rome with Sifrei Torah in their arms walked in proud parade on Yom Haatzmaut. They walked the other way, towards Jerusalem, symbol now of Israel restored. The Jew lives on against all the logic and the odds of history, and that is the deepest mystery of civilisation, ... unless you accept with thanksgiving that God watches over us and by His providence alone we have returned to Jerusalem. So Jerusalem is the symbol of the greatest miracle and mystery of all time, the miracle and mystery of Jewish survival despite all the logic of history.

2. CONTRAST:

Towards the end of the Pesach Hagada we say, Karev Yom asher hu lo yom velo layla. "A day coming that is neither day nor night". What can that mean?

Does it mean a day of mixed blessings like our time? Facing enemies for 58 years - war after war - still under threat, and yet blessed with the miracle of national revival, experiencing the thriving power and dynamism that is Israel?

Does it mean the great economic miracle that is Israel, alongside the danger of terrorism and Intifada, threats from outside and inside its borders?

Does it mean the great ingathering of exiles, alongside the problematic Jewish status of many of those immigrants?

Does it mean the glory of a Jewish State mixed with the internal strife that shames us? “A time that is both night and day”, and therefore neither, entirely. A day that is not quite, yet, the time when the great and pure light of geula shelema will shine out....

And does it also mean that before the brightness of day, there is sometimes a very dark night? Hardly any other period has been as shrouded in darkness and suffering as ours. Yet none have seen the passing of the night and its turning into day, as clearly as we have.

3. THE GEULAH PROCESS:

Isn't that what the Jerusalem Talmud meant when it told how Rabbi Hiyya Rabbah, verabi Shimon bar Halafta, hayu mehalchin behada Bikas Arbel bekaritzta, verau ayelet hashachar shebaka ora. Amar Rabbi Hiyya leRabbi Shimon, “Berebbi, kach hi geulatan shel Yisrael, metzaftzefet bitchika kima kima, kol mah shehi metzaftzefet, hi rabbah veholeches”. “The great Rabbi Hiyya and Rabbi Shimon Bar Halafta were walking in the Valley of Arbel just before the dawn, and saw the dawn just beginning to break. Said Rabbi Hiyya to Rabbi Shimon, ‘My Master, that is how the geulah will come. It will begin almost imperceptibly, like the dawn, but once it starts, it will grow ever brighter and stronger’. This we believe, and for this we pray.

3. THE BEGINNINGS:

What were the earliest manifestations of the geulah? What were the first glimmerings of the dawn of Zionism?

- Was it Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kalisher, that great student of Rabbi Akiva Eger, born in 1795, who in all his writings taught that the prophets' promise of Messiah's coming will come true only as the last stage of a process which must begin with human endeavor. Scattered Jewry, helped by some nations of the world, must gradually return to their land and rebuild it. They must redeem the soil and revive it. To do so, they must establish settlements in our land and begin to colonize it....

- Or was it with that Sefardic Rabbi, Yehuda Shlomo Alkalai, born in 1798, who studied in Jerusalem and who made aliya after 40 years as a Haham in Serbia, and who called for teshuva, return: declaring that teshuva is not only return from sin; it also means return to the Land! That is the teshuva that we must perform! Without such teshuva, there would be no geulah! Was it his program, requiring that we stress agriculture, revive Hebrew, build settlements, establish a Parliament, merge the edot, the Sefardic and Ashkenazic communities, into one citizenry? Was Alkalai, who died in Jerusalem in 1878, the precursor of redemption?

- Or was it the students of the Gaon of Vilna, who all made aliya settling in Jerusalem or Tzefat, following their master's teaching, so that the Synagogue customs in Israel till this day largely follow those of their Master?

- Or was it the Kabbalists of Tzefat, who in the 16th century came to Israel against most difficult odds, their lives at threat every step of the way?

- Or was it the 300 Tosafists, great German sages and their families, who went on aliya in medieval times in spite of horrible hardships?

- Or was it Nahmanides, Ramban, who said, when he arrived in Israel in the year 1267, kol hakadosh yoter, harev yoter, "The holier the place, the more desolate it is", and who stated the doctrine that there will be two redemptions of Israel; the first by human acts, through our own striving; and only then, through God's miracles made manifest before our eyes? (Ramban's commentary on Shir Hashirim).

- Or was it the author of the Kuzari, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, the great Jewish sage, philosopher poet of Spain's Golden Age of Jewry, who lost his life in making aliya to the Promised Land, and whose words, libi bamizrach veanochi besof maarav, "My heart is in the East, though I am in the uttermost West", have been a motto of Zionists ever since?

- Or was it the pious and righteous who strove to maintain a presence in Jerusalem even before the Crusades, many of whom gave their lives in this struggle?

- Or earlier? Was it not, rather, that first exile who took with him his Sefer Torah, and with Jerusalem yet burning, looked back, while dragged in chains, even under Titus' Arch of Triumph, and swore that fiery oath, Im eshkech Yerushalayim, tishkach yemini, tidbak leshoni lehiki, im lo ezkerechi, im lo aale et Yerushalayim al rosh simchati. "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten; let my tongue cleave to my palate if I do not always remember thee; if I do not place Jerusalem, above my fondest joy." Surely that first step to exile was not only a step away from Zion, but also actually the first step of Israel's return to Zion! That first step into darkness was also the first step towards the dawn which we seen unfolding before our eyes in our time.

4. TODAY

So Rabbi Hiyya Rabbah and Rabban Shimon bar Halafta saw ahead into our own time. They saw the glimmering of the dawn; saw how it can grow stronger and brighter; saw the secret of the future, saw Jerusalem reunited never to be split again, saw the beautiful light of geulah shelemah shetavo bimhera beyamenu amen veamen