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## WHAT IS THE MEANING OF “*RESHIT TSEMIHAT GE’ULLATENU*”?

### A. JOY AND TREPIDATION

“**Y**ou shall say on that day: I will praise You, O God; although You were angry with me, Your anger is turned back and You comfort me” (Isaiah 12:1).

We experienced this verse on the day the State of Israel was declared. The fifth of *Iyyar*, 5708 (May 14, 1948), was a day of God’s anger, for we received the bitter news of the fall of Gush Etzion and the many victims who were slaughtered here. But it was also a day of God “turning back” and “comforting me.”

Although intellectually I understand the importance of our celebration today, it is psychologically and emotionally difficult for me to rejoice. One reason for this difficulty concerns upcoming events in Gush Katif. One of the forty-eight traits by virtue of which the Torah is acquired is “sharing the yoke with one’s neighbor.” In other words, one must not let another person bear his burden alone; one must not stand by and observe from the side. Rather, one must feel existential partnership with his brother in distress and help share his burden.

Along with my anxiety for the residents of Gush Katif, I also have grave concerns—which should not be hidden—regarding the security situation following the disengagement and regarding the political results of the disengagement process as well. My personal opinion is that until the coming of the Messiah, we will have problems with the Arab world; the question is just at what level.

Beyond these problems, there is another factor that clouds my joy: We are all part of religious-Zionism, a movement that is currently in deep crisis.

For these reasons, it is difficult for me to speak. Yet it is important to emphasize that my difficulty is only emotional. From an ideological per-

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spective, I have no problem rejoicing on *Yom ha-Atsma'ut* this year. I danced and rejoiced on the fifth of *Iyyar*, 5708, when the State was declared without Gush Katif, without Jaffa, without Nahariya, and without the Old City of Jerusalem—so should I not rejoice today? We cannot deny that the current period is a bitter one, but then, too—when we heard about the fall of Gush Etzion—it was bitter, and nevertheless we rejoiced! Therefore, the problem is more emotional than substantial.

This year we are hearing, for the first time, some voices from within the religious-Zionist camp calling on us not to celebrate *Yom ha-Atsma'ut* and not to recite *Hallel*. Although several leading rabbis have denounced this call, the very fact that rabbis have made the statement, “We have no portion and inheritance in the land of Israel,” must give rise to very serious questions. What is the origin of this confusion, which has completely reversed the attitude of many people towards the State?

It seems to me that the main problem stems from the fact that among various groups, doubts have begun to arise concerning the expression *reshit tsemihat ge'ullatenu* (the beginning of the flowering of our redemption). What is the source of these doubts? They arise from the philosophy of a great man, Rav Tsevi Yehuda ha-Kohen Kook *zt"l*, and principally from the philosophy of his students. Since I believe that the majority of religious-Zionism does not identify with the philosophy that I shall discuss shortly, and I count myself among that majority, I feel a need to express my opinion and to serve as their mouthpiece. I hope that you will listen to what I have to say, although this is not an opinion that is usually voiced.

### B. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STATE

In fact, the concept of the beginning of the redemption (*athalta de-ge'ulla*) was spoken about long before the establishment of the State. The students of the Vilna Gaon and the students of the Ba'al Shem Tov who made aliya to *erevs Yisra'el* decided that they were living at the time of the beginning of the redemption. The son-in-law of Rav Yehoshua Kutner brought a letter from Rav Eliyahu Guttmacher, one of the leading disciples of Rav Akiva Eiger, written in the year 5634 (1874), in which he asserts that if there were 130 families working the land in *erevs Yisra'el*, this would be considered the “beginning of the redemption.”

Before the founding of the State, Rav Avraham Yitshak ha-Kohen Kook also decided that we were living in the time of the beginning of

the redemption on the basis of a well-known Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 98a):

Rabbi Abba said: There is no more revealed sign of the redemption than that which is written: “And you, O mountains of Israel—you shall give forth your branches and bear fruit for My nation, Israel” (Ezekiel 36:8).

His son, R. Tsevi Yehuda, also spoke about this—but in his time the State was already established. And so the question arose: What was so special about the establishment of the State? If the land began to give its fruit to the nation of Israel before the creation of the State, and the beginning of the redemption was already upon us, then what great change came about with the State’s birth?

The students of R. Tsevi Yehuda had an answer to this question: Indeed, the establishment of the State brought about something new. In light of Ramban’s teaching in his comments on Ramban’s *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, they explained that the beginning of the redemption refers not to the Jewish nation dwelling in the land of Israel, but rather to the absolute sovereignty of the Jewish nation over all parts of *erets Yisra’el*. I heard this for the first time many years ago, and I was astounded to discover that they believed that a major component of the significance of the State was that it facilitated the fulfillment of the command to dwell in the land of Israel and to conquer it, in accordance with the teaching of Ramban. According to this understanding, if a major aspect of the purpose of the State is the fulfillment of the command to exercise sovereignty over *erets Yisra’el*, then a State that hands over territories betrays its purpose, and we must question whether it is still the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. According to this view, the State is invested with significance by virtue of its exercising sovereignty over all areas of the land. To my mind, this is the source of the doubts among the religious-Zionist public today concerning the significance of the State.

I do not believe in this approach. I can testify concerning myself that I recited the blessing of “*she-Hebeyanu*” and I danced on November 29, 1947 at Be’erot Yitshak, even though the UN had partitioned the land, and likewise in 1948. Our feeling was one of elation; it was as though there was an intoxicating drug in the air—Israeli independence. We weren’t rejoicing because of what Ramban taught, but rather because of the fulfillment of Herzl’s vision. At that time, R. Tsevi Yehuda recounted, “I could not go out and participate in the festivities . . . for indeed, God’s word—‘They have divided My land’ (Joel 4:2)—was being fulfilled. . . . In that condition—my whole body shaken, wounded all over,

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cut up into pieces—I could not rejoice.”<sup>1</sup> We—the simple Jews among whom I regard myself—didn’t know about Ramban. We knew that there was Israeli independence, Jewish sovereignty in our land—and we rejoiced over that.

### C. JEWISH SOVEREIGNTY

I didn’t invent this approach. In the previous generation, there were rabbis who spoke about the “beginning of the redemption,” the “revealed end,” the “footsteps of the Messiah”—and a few years later came the Holocaust, the greatest disaster that had ever happened in all of Jewish history. Anyone who thought that he was witnessing the signs of the complete redemption was proved wrong in the Holocaust.

When the State was established, some of the greatest Torah sages in the world—some of whom I was fortunate to know—declared that although we were not living in the time of the “revealed end” of the “footsteps of the *Mashi’ah*,” there was still great importance to the political freedom of establishing a State. Rambam writes that one of the reasons for the festival of Hanukka is that “Jewish sovereignty was restored for more than two hundred years” during the period of the Hasmoneans<sup>2</sup> —even though we know of the low moral standing of the many members of the Hasmonean dynasty. The Mishna teaches that on *Yom Kippur* the *Kohen Gadol* would recite eight blessings, one of which is “Upon Israel” (*Yoma* 68b). The Gemara explains that this blessing is “Upon Your nation, Israel, which needs to be saved” (*Yoma* 70a). Rambam elaborates: “Its theme is that God should save Israel, and not let them be left without a king.”<sup>3</sup> Again, although we know what type of kings ruled during the Second Temple period, and we know how deficient their moral and religious levels were, Rambam nevertheless asserts that the salvation of Israel is expressed in sovereignty and royalty.

For these reasons, the Chief Rabbis, including Rav Herzog *zt”l*, ruled that the establishment of the State of Israel was the beginning of the flowering of our redemption. A situation in which *am Yisra’el* has a king (sovereignty) and freedom is a harbinger of redemption. We have no previous accounts; following the Holocaust, any previous accounts are hidden away. We do not know what is supposed to happen or what is destined to take place, but there is no doubt that the establishment of the State of Israel is of great significance in its own right.

After the Oslo Accords, when Israel transferred a few cities to Palestinian control, I participated in a panel discussion in New York

with some other Israeli rabbis. One of the questions raised was whether it was still possible to speak of the beginning of the flowering of our redemption following the handing over of territories to the Palestinians. One of the speakers answered that if R. Kook spoke about the beginning of the flowering of our redemption in his time, we can certainly speak in such terms in our own times. In response, I said that, with all due respect to the teachings of R. Kook, a Holocaust had happened in the meantime. Hence, I would not talk about drawing inferences from R. Kook's time to ours. Rather, I would say that if we believed in the beginning of the flowering of our redemption in 1948, then we could certainly still use this term after the Oslo Accords.

When R. Herzog spoke of the beginning of the flowering of our redemption, he did not mean the messianic redemption; rather, he meant the simple redemption consisting of Jewish sovereignty in the land. *Hatam Sofer* (*Parashat Shoftim*, 37) comments that several times during the course of history, God wanted to redeem Israel with an incomplete redemption—as during the period of the Second Temple—but the nation of Israel refused, for we have no desire for an incomplete redemption without the *Mashi'ah*. *Hatam Sofer* wrote this prior to the Holocaust, but after that terrible period during which people sailed aimlessly in boats, with no home, we understand that there was never any *hillul Hashem*—desecration of God's name—like the Holocaust, nor any *kiddush Hashem*—sanctification of God's name—like the establishment of the State. There can be no doubt that praise and thanks should be offered for the establishment of the State, even if it is not a messianic redemption, the “revealed end.”

Indeed, in 1948 we did not speak of the *Mashi'ah*. We prayed for *malkhut Yisra'el* and sufficed with sovereignty comparable to that of the Second Temple period. There is no doubt that we attained at least that much. During Ezra's time, very few people came back to Israel; in our time—thank God, we have reached five or six million. We have never had such numbers here!

The messianic feeling, the sense of the “revealed end,” started after the Six Day War. In realistic terms, it was difficult to understand how we had managed to defeat seven Arab armies with such ease. Admittedly, there were Torah giants who thought otherwise. In his typically resolute fashion, Rav Shlomo Goren *zt"l* said immediately after the war, in a speech at Mosad ha-Rav Kook, that all the events of that war were not miraculous. As proof, he brought the verse, “And it was, when Pharaoh sent out the nation, that God did not lead them by way of the land of

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the Philistines . . . for God said, ‘Lest the nation regret [leaving] when they see war [approaching], and return to Egypt’” (Exodus 13:17). Could God then not perform miracles for Israel in the war to conquer the land, as He did for them in Egypt? What R. Goren wanted to say was that this was proof that wars of conquest of *erets Yisra’el* are not carried out through miracles, but rather through human means. Hence, since the Six Day War was a war for *erets Yisra’el*, it could not be miraculous. Admittedly, this approach remains an uncommon one. For a large sector of the public, the Six Day War actually strengthened the view that the significance of the State of Israel is bound up with ruling over *erets Yisra’el*, rather than with the actual fact of Jewish sovereignty, autonomy, and freedom. These people regarded the war as a revealed miracle and as proof of the imminent messianic redemption.

### D. MAINTAINING THE JEWISH MAJORITY

At the same time, after the Six Day War, some Jews—both religious and secular—stood up and said that the partition of the land that had been forced upon us by the UN during the British mandate should be nullified. One of these people was Professor Yisra’el Eldad, who said, “We’re finished with the partition; let’s get back to the greater land of Israel.”

These people began to speak about a vision of the complete *erets Yisra’el*, but they didn’t notice the Arabs living within the borders of that “Whole land of Israel.” At the time of the establishment of the State, the Arab population within the borders of the country was relatively small, and there was a chance that the Jewish nation would remain the majority for the long term. Today, after our conquest of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza, there arises a risk that the State will not remain Jewish. When the government agreed that marriage and divorce would be handled in this country in accordance with religious principles, and that public institutions would observe *kashrut*, this flowed from the sense that this is a Jewish country. But in a Jewish country there must be a Jewish majority, and this is diminishing with time.

For this reason, since the Six Day War, no government of Israel has dreamed of annexing Judea, Samaria, and Gaza as part of the State of Israel. We annexed the Golan Heights, where there are no Arabs, and Jerusalem—based on the view that we could deal with the number of Arabs living there. But annexing Judea, Samaria, and Gaza? How long could we hold on without giving the Arabs the right to vote? Even

those on the far left admit that the Arabs should not be granted the right of return, for this would destroy the Jewish character of the State.

Two approaches were proposed to deal with the problem of how to retain all of the land despite the demographic issue. One fundamentally secular approach led by Rehavam Ze'evi *Hy"d*, claimed that the solution was a "transfer" of the Arabs. Aside from the moral problem involved, no Arab state has ever agreed to take in these Arabs. Still, the transfer approach arose from logical reasoning: If we want to annex all of *erets Yisra'el*, we must find a solution to the demographic problem.

A second approach, whose proponents included religious people with a zealous vision of greater *erets Yisra'el*, claimed that the solution would be found with the coming of the *Mashi'ah*, and since the *Mashi'ah* is already knocking at the door, there is no need to worry about the pragmatic, actual ramifications of our actions. This messianic thinking—which perceived the *Mashi'ah* as already lurking somewhere in the Jerusalem mountains, soon to be revealed to us—is what led to this view.

To my sorrow, I have not merited divine inspiration. I have never met a prophet who fit all of Rambam's identifying criteria who told me that the *Mashi'ah* is already on the way. When I established Yeshivat Har Etzion, the architect who designed the *bet midrash* planned it without windows. I told her about the *tsaddik* in whose town a *shofar* blast was once heard, and the whole community thought that the *Mashi'ah* had arrived. The *tsaddik* poked his nose out of the window, sniffed gently, and said, "No. When the *Mashi'ah* comes, it will be possible to sense it in the air." A *bet midrash* needs windows in order to be able to sense when the *Mashi'ah* is coming. If I haven't yet sensed the *Mashi'ah*'s footsteps, it is a sign that the *Mashi'ah* hasn't yet come.

In any event, we must rejoice today just as we rejoiced in 1948. We must recognize that just as the Holocaust was a gargantuan *hillul Hashem*, so the State of Israel is the greatest *kiddush Hashem*. We have a problem with giving away parts of *erets Yisra'el*, but let us look at what the Holy One has done for us! We have an independent State, we are a prosperous country, and we are militarily strong. True, there is poverty and there are plenty of other problems, but it is difficult to conceive of the magnitude of the change that has been wrought in our condition over the past sixty years.

We are permitted to rejoice wholeheartedly on *Yom ha-Atsma'ut*. Despite our pain, we must follow Rashi's words: "At a time of mourning—one mourns; at a time of joy—one rejoices" (Genesis 6:6). This is

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“a time of joy,” and therefore let us declare without reservation, “This day—God has made; let us celebrate and rejoice in it!” (Psalms 118:24).

## NOTES

This article is based on a lecture delivered on *Yom ha-Atsma'ut* 5765 (2005). It was adapted by Shaul Barth with Reuven Ziegler and translated by Kaeren Fish.

1. *Erets ha-Tsevi*, (Bet El: Netivei Or, 1995), p. 2.
2. *Hilkhot Hanukka* 3:1.
3. *Hilkhot Avodat Yom ha-Kippurim* 3:11.