

Our Dependence Upon Israel's Independence

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The seventeenth anniversary of the independence of the State of Israel, which we shall celebrate later this week, affords us the occasion to reexamine our own attitudes and orientations towards the State. I do not, in all honesty, believe that full justice can be done to such a significant theme in the confines of a single sermon. Let us, therefore, merely outline some general principles which ought to guide such considerations.

This introspection must be characterized, above all, by a radical frankness and an honesty that may prove painful. In the past, economic exigencies, organizational bias, and the normal desire to avoid confronting unpleasant dilemmas, have usually deterred us from a self-analysis. Indeed, such a searching self-examination will probably leave many of us perplexed, and even deeply disturbed. But it is a blessed perplexity that takes the place of the pedestrian platitudes that have so long substituted for thinking in the past.

The fact is that American Jews of all persuasions are in a state of crisis concerning their position and orientation towards the State of Israel. We are beset by certain paradoxes and contradictions. If I be permitted to paraphrase from Avot 1:2, the world stands on three pillars: on Torah, on *avodah* (which means prayer or the sacrificial service), and on charitable endeavors. So may it be said of the American Jewish world with regard to Israel, that it is comprised of three groups. First is "Torah": the Orthodox Jew, whose love for Israel and devotion to the State is part of the larger context of his commitment to Torah and Judaism. The second is *avodah* - literally the word means work, and here I include those who are devoted organizational workers for the various Zionist groups. The third, *gemillat hassadim*, comprises those many people whose major expression of interest in Israel is through financial support, such as the U.J.A. and Bonds for Israel.

The American Jews whose orientation to Israel is expressed as *avodah*, that is, the political Zionists, especially the secular Zionists, are in a state of deep crisis. Their dilemma is well known: they have, paradoxically, been defeated by success. Their stated purpose was the creation of an independent state. They succeeded in this goal; because it was fulfilled they therefore are left without a purpose. It is fairly apparent to all objective observers that without

institutional inertia, these organizations would have disappeared with the emergence of the State of Israel in 1948.

Gemillat hassadim as an expression of loyalty to Israel is very important. Israel needs our financial assistance. But all of us hope that the time is not far off when the State will achieve economic independence from us as well as peace with its neighbors. What then? When we shall no longer have to contribute financially or politically to the State, how shall we relate to the State of Israel? Is it conceivable that American Jews will be left with no special relationship towards Israel?

We Orthodox Jews, whose position in Israel is expressed by the word "Torah," have been spared, largely, the crises of the other two. Our love for Israel is independent either of political or economical conditions. Our program is not merely one of supporting an economy or creating a government machinery. Our purpose depends neither upon votes nor upon funds, though it may include both. Therefore, neither independence nor peace nor security constitutes a threat to our relationship to Israel, for these do not represent the fulfillment of our goals. Our end is nothing less than the Messianic vision of the complete redemption, a term which includes a spiritual renaissance of the Land of Israel and the People of Israel according to the Torah of Israel; and, ultimately, the spiritual regeneration of all mankind in universal peace and justice.

Yet, American Orthodox Jews do face a problem that they cannot continue to avoid indefinitely. Our critics in Israel, both those who are Orthodox and those who are not, have pressed this problem upon us, and we ought to consider it seriously and courageously, not — as we have done — polemically. That is, the act of settling in the Land of Israel is one of the 613 commandments. In a remarkable passage, the late Rav Kook points out that, surprisingly, Maimonides in his *Sefer HaMitzvot* does not include as detailed commandments those precepts which are fundamental to the whole of Torah; and therefore *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* is not reckoned by him as an individual commandment because it is an underlying principle of the whole of Judaism. It is too important to be regarded as just a mitzvah.

In the past, our people did not emigrate to the Land of Israel en masse because of the extremely difficult conditions that prevailed: hostile government, harsh and forbidding environment, and the absence of a community large enough and stable enough to absorb immigrants.

But today Israel is a free and independent State, and is even blessed with a measure of prosperity. Hence, the question is asked: why not practice and stress this great precept of *aliyah*? And we ought to honestly ask the same question of ourselves: indeed, why not *aliyah*? There has been some trickle of American Jews emigrating to Israel, but how about the rest of us? How can we square our religious conscience and intellectual integrity with our apparent non-concern with *aliyah*?

There are of course a number of objections to *aliyah* that are offered as an excuse for our neglect of this great principle of Jewish life. Upon reflection, most of them are not worth taking seriously. Let us, for the sake of analysis, consider them briefly.

We are told by some people that American Jews are not in exile, in *galut*, and that therefore *aliyah* is not obligatory upon us. Some of those who propose this comparatively novel thesis are motivated by an exaggerated Americanism. They fear that the assertion of our exilehood is an act

of disloyalty to the United States. Historically, this is false. There were amongst our ancestors some who lived in countries of the Diaspora that were blessed with benign governments that allowed full freedom to Jews and Judaism. Yet they never doubted that they were in exile, and never were aware of any conflict between their loyalty to their government and their desire for redemption. Only a totalitarian government insists upon the total loyalties of its citizens. A democratic government asks only that its citizens perform their civic duties and affirm their allegiance to the constitution; it does not forbid them to cherish ancient dreams, present prayers, and visions of a future redemption. It is odd that those who protest loudest against the idea that we are in exile in this country do so largely because they are afraid of the impression that will be made upon other Americans if American Jews consider themselves in exile. What greater exile is there than this?!

Indeed, we are in *galut*! To deny this is to abandon our hopes for *geulah*, for redemption, to scuttle our belief in the Messiah, to make a shambles of our Torah, to invalidate all of our Jewish past and its sublime dreams for the future, and to reduce our prayers to a kind of sanctified hypocrisy. Ours may be a comfortable *galut*, a *galut* in which we have a large measure of freedom; but a convenient *galut* remains a *galut*!

The Baal Shem Tov once taught this principle in one of his inimitable comments. We read in Isaiah a verse with which we are familiar because we recite it on Rosh Hashanah:

On that day (the day of the redemption) a great shofar will be sounded, and those who are lost in the land of Ashur (Assyria) and those who are dispersed in the Land of Egypt will return to the Holy Land.

Isaiah 27:13

והיה ביום ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול
ובאו האבדים בארץ אשור והנדחים
בארץ מצרים והשתחוו לה' בהר
הקדש בירושלם:
ישעיהו כז:יג

But, asks the Baal Shem Tov, will Assyria and Egypt be the only countries from which the exiles will return in the future? He replies that these two countries represent two types of exile. He explains these symbols by rearranging the vowels. Egypt, or מצרים (*Mitzrayim*), can be rearranged to read מצרים (*metzarim*), narrow straits, difficulty, oppression. Assyria, אשור, (*Ashur*), can be read as אושר (*osher*), happiness, prosperity, plenty. In other words, there are two types of exile: one of them, symbolized by Egypt, is the classical form of *galut*, that of oppression and hatred and bigotry, in which our people are persecuted and dispersed. But there is also another kind of exile which is just the reverse. It is the one symbolized by Assyria. It is the exile of Jews in luxury in which we are lost, because our sublime aims and lofty goals have become deflected as a result of the abundance of convenience and comfort and plenty and prosperity. As a result, we have lost sight of the great Jewish vision of redemption. It is from these two exiles, that of oppression and that of prosperity, that Messiah will redeem us on the day that the great shofar will be sounded.

Indeed, the greatest exile - as one great Jew once said - occurs when we do not know that we are in exile. The more we forget our exilehood, the deeper we are caught in it. And what is our condition in America if not exile when we read of the increasing assimilation and growing intermarriage, when non-Jews nationally proclaim that we are the "vanishing Jews of America"?

One need not be a pessimist as to the future survival of our people in this country to admit that we are suffering a terrible attrition. Galut indeed! The argument against *aliyah* because we American Jews are not in exile is a spurious one, and does not deserve to be taken seriously.

Then there are those who turn the argument around, and would discourage *aliyah*, or excuse our neglect of it, because of faults they find in the State of Israel. Israel, they tell us, is itself not exactly a complete religious state; not all of its citizens are totally observant. The Israelis too are in *galut*!

Perhaps conditions in Israel are less than ideal, but this argument is only a semantic trick. One need not equate the State of Israel with the complete redemption and the ultimate Messianic state in order to promote the idea of *aliyah*. The fact is that there is more "Yiddishkeit" and opportunity for the practice of Judaism in Israel than any place else in the world — Brooklyn and Manhattan included.

It is true, that to the untrained eye of a tourist, it sometimes seems as if Judaism is in exile in the Holy Land. However, it requires a special insight, an extraordinary gift, in order to be able to see the truth: that Judaism is much more vibrant, much more prevalent, much more real in Israel than it is any place in the world. A great Rabbi once explained, with regard to this special insight, one of the prayers in our *amidah*. We pray thrice daily, *לציון ברחמים עינינו בשובך* may our eyes behold when Thou returnest to Zion in love. Why, he asks, do we pray that our eyes behold that God returns to Zion; why do we not simply pray that God returns to Zion? The answer is that even if God returned to Zion, we might not notice it. Sometimes He is there in His full holiness and glory — only we fail to see it! We are blind to the great and sacred realities of God's presence in the Holy Land. Therefore we implore Him "Almighty God, allow our eyes to see what already is a fact, that Thou hast indeed returned to Zion!"

The only real objection to *aliyah* is not theoretical but practical. We have made our lives here in this country. We have settled here, raised our families, struck our roots, built our businesses, and advanced our careers and professions. *Aliyah* proves very difficult for us, no matter how genuine our commitment to it.

This is a more honest position than to attempt to argue away our responsibility and justify our failure. It is a frank admission of a practical failure, and not an attempt to rationalize our inadequacy by discarding the ideal as such.

Nevertheless, we must never remain satisfied with merely abstract ideals, for that which is unrealizable is essentially unreal. *Aliyah* must be not only an ideal but a principle. It must govern behavior and conduct. Therefore, if we ourselves, for very practical reasons, cannot emigrate to the Holy Land, we should encourage and assist those who can.

But that too is insufficient. Such an approach might well lead us into the classical position of the two Zionists who express their Zionism by deciding that a third must go on *aliyah* to Israel. If we are honest about our reasons for not emigrating — that they are practical, not theoretical — then we must at least see to it that our children will go. We must prepare our children for *aliyah* before they are settled here. If not all our children, at least each family must decide that the one child most fit for emigration ought to be prepared for it. We must decide to train at least one

child in that kind of career or profession or business that will enable him to go on *aliyah*. We must imbue him with the spirit of Israel, and create in him that idealism which will help him fulfill the destiny which all of Israel must ultimately share.

No parent regards it as a tragedy if his child becomes a lawyer in California or marries an engineer in South America, or goes into business in Alaska. The world is smaller today than it ever was before. It will be smaller yet ten years from now. We should regard it as a blessing if a child of ours fulfills our dreams, our duties, our highest spiritual and national vocation, by directing him to settle in the Holy Land, on *aliyah*, and live a full vibrant Jewish life.

Our religious integrity requires it. Israel needs *olim* from the United States. And America needs it! The American Jewish community will be able the better to survive if it sends some of the cream of its youth to the Holy Land. American Jewish youth has begun to look elsewhere for the outlets for its native idealism. We must redirect our children and their idealism to the State of Israel. These precious *olim* will be the permanent human bond between Israeli and American Jewry. For indeed, if we will not be *olim*, we will be *yordim*. If we will not go up, we may, heaven forbid, go down!

While the solution is not overly difficult, it is not easy. Facing this issue is no easier for me than for anyone else. But we ignore it at the peril of our own souls and our own integrity.

Now that Israel is independent, we must consider *aliyah* as an opportunity. The future of American Jewry itself will be enhanced by such *aliyah*. We are, in a large measure, dependent upon Israel's independence.

As seen in this perspective, the question of *aliyah* is not a problem but a prospect, not a perplexity but an opportunity. Let this be uppermost in our minds on this seventeenth birthday of Israel. It can be a most powerful stimulus for the good for us and our children. Indeed, the numerical value of the Hebrew word for "good" (טוב) is seventeen — the number of the birthday of Israel this year! It was *Eretz Yisrael* that was described in the Torah as "good" - טובה הארץ מאוד - גאוד, "the Land is very very good!"

Let us never lose sight of our attachment to that Land. Let us never substitute for our real loyalty to it a mere financial commitment or political interest or sentimental association. For the land is indeed very very good. Through our loyalty to it, may it continue to be very very good for us, for our children, for all Israel, and ultimately for all mankind.