

“The Beginning of the Flowering of Our Redemption”

Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter

It was not supposed to be this way. The unfolding of Jewish history in its final stages was meant to follow a certain expected trajectory and this did not fit. The narrative of our nation was a narrative of the alternating realities of exile and redemption, Temple, and destruction. After wandering in the desert, our forefathers arrived in the Promised Land and, after a number of centuries, the Temple was built. A few hundred years later, it was destroyed and the Jews went into exile. Exile ended, albeit after a brief period of time, with the building of the Second Temple. But this too was destroyed and, once again, the Jews went into exile, this time a long and bitter exile. And, for close to two millennia, the expectation was that this exile would end the same way the previous one did, with the building of the Temple, the Third and final Temple.¹ But this did not quite happen.

1. I write this aware of the fact that the reality of the early years of both the First and Second Temples was more complex and multilayered.

On the one hand, I submit that exile, as it had existed for some nineteen hundred years, came to an end with the founding of the State of Israel. *Blessed are You... who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time.* No longer did helplessness, precariousness, or vulnerability fully define Jewish existence throughout the world. There was now a Jewish state, a Jewish homeland under the authority of Jews. Jewish pride, confidence, and power now defined much of Jewish existence. To make the point clear, imagine how different the Jewish world would look today if the State of Israel had been founded just ten years earlier, in 1938 instead of 1948. The State of Israel has, thank God, made an enormous difference not only for those Jews living in it but for Jews all over the world.

Yet, on the other hand, even its most fervent supporters recognize that the State of Israel has not brought about redemption. Indeed, final redemption seems very far off. “Only a part of the Jewish people has gathered together into a Jewish state, and only in certain areas of the country. Only some of the returnees observe the precepts of the Torah. Political and military strife has not vanished from the land. Peace is elusive and morality compromised. Universal redemption seems even more remote than before.”²

Surely, the Jewish state today is not what our grandparents – and their grandparents – had in mind when they prayed for close to two millennia: “May our eyes witness Your return to Zion in mercy,” or “May You return to Your city, Jerusalem, in mercy.” In the scheme of Jewish historical expectations, the State of Israel is “the unexpected state.”³

And so the question is clear. What is the religious status of this reality that is neither here nor there, neither exile nor redemption? “Does what has been achieved constitute a part of the process of final redemption or is it an abortion of that process? Is this the beginning of the End, a step toward the fulfillment of the prophetic promises, or is it rather a violent betrayal of those promises in all their perfection?”⁴

2. Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism* (Chicago, 1996), 1.

3. See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, “Israel, the Unexpected State: Messianism, Sectarianism, and the Zionist Revolution,” in David N. Meyers and Alexander Kaye, eds., *The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History* (Waltham, 2014), 277–96.

4. Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism*, *ibid.*

Contemplating the possibility of a political return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, the shapers of religious Zionist ideology in the nineteenth century framed their vision in redemptive terms. For example, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer applied to the newly unfolding political development of his time the age-old concept of redemption taking place step-by-step, little by little, “*me’at me’at... le’at le’at*.”⁵ In the same context, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai invoked the rabbinic image of “*kim’a kim’a*.”⁶ Rabbi Yisrael Yehoshua Trunk of Kutno wrote in 1891, and Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook in 1913, that the gathering of Jews in Eretz Yisrael, then slowly under way, was “*at’halta degeula*, the beginning of the redemption.”⁷ Ze’ev Yavetz, the editor of *HaMizrah*, the official publication of the religious Zionist Mizrachi movement, supported the Uganda Plan suggested by the British in 1903, going so far as to consider it to be “*at’halta degeula*.”⁸

These sentiments, and there are many more such examples, only grew in intensity as the practical establishment of a political state became more and more realistic. Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer, one of the most prominent rabbis of the Yishuv, favored the partition plan recommended by the Peel Commission in July 1937, referring to it as “*at’halta degeula*,” even though the amount of land it granted the Jews was only a fraction of what they wanted.⁹ One decade later, on December 21, 1947, a few months before the founding of the State, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Eretz

5. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer, *Derishat Tzion* (Jerusalem, 1964), 88.

6. Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai, “*Minhat Yehuda*,” in *Kitvei HaRav Yehuda Alkalai*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1974), 201–202. This phrase and the concept it represents appears multiple times in rabbinic literature. See, for example, *Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabba* 6:10; *Midrash Esther Rabba* 10:14; *Midrash Tanhuma, Devarim* 1; Yerushalmi, Berakhot 1:1, Yoma 3:2; *Midrash Tehillim* 18:36. See Rabbi Menaḥem M. Kasher, *HaTekufa HaGedola* (Jerusalem, 1969), 67–70.

7. For the rabbi of Kutno, see *Shu”t Yeshuot Malko, Yoreh De’ah* #66; for Rabbi Kook, see *Iggerot HaRaaya*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1985), 176.

8. See Mordecai Eliav, “*HaMizrah – Ketav HaEt HaRishon shel HaMizrah*,” *Sinai* 129–130 (2002), 41.

9. This was reported by Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac HaLevi Herzog (who opposed the recommendation) at the eulogy he delivered for Rabbi Meltzer in 1953. See Rabbi Itamar Warhaftig, “*Emdat Rabbanim BePolmos Halukat HaAretz* (5697),” *Tehumin* 9 (1988), 270, n. 3. My thanks to Rabbi Shmuel Marcus for bringing this source to my attention.

Yisrael, Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac HaLevi Herzog, wrote to the religious Zionist leader Shlomo Zalman Shragai: “Blessed be He that we have reached this stage, even though it is still only the beginning of the redemption, and perhaps only the beginning of the beginning.”¹⁰ The sole religious or traditional categories available to these thinkers were redemptive images, which they invoked – again and again – while fully aware that a significant amount of limiting or tempering or hedging was fully in order. What is now unfolding, wrote Rabbi Herzog, is “only the beginning of the redemption,” one step removed from redemption, “and perhaps only the beginning of the beginning,” two steps removed.¹¹

It is precisely this nuanced formulation, acknowledging the arrival of a form of redemption albeit with a double hedge – “the beginning of the beginning” – that made its way into the Prayer for the State of Israel, in the words “*reishit tzemihāt geulatenu*.” The incipient State is described here as “the beginning of the flowering of our redemption.” It surely was not recognized as “our redemption”; it was even understood as representing neither “the beginning of our redemption” nor “the flowering of our redemption.” The best that can be asserted is that it is “the beginning of the flowering of our redemption,” once again two steps removed from redemption. Engaged in a battle for its very survival that commenced even before the State was founded against a vastly stronger and more powerful enemy, it was manifestly obvious to the authors of this text that the State did not represent the final vision of redemption but, just as clearly, they asserted that the absolute miracle of a Jewish state in the Jewish homeland after two thousand years was surely to be understood and framed within the context of redemption, perceived as a process that was beginning to unfold.

10. *Barkai 2* (1985), 223.

11. Note also the formulation used by Winston Churchill in the speech he delivered at the Lord Mayor’s Day Luncheon in London on November 9, 1942, celebrating the British victory at the Battle of El Alamein: “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” This victory was crucial for the safety of the Yishuv, stopping the advance of General Erwin Rommel which had threatened to destroy it and bringing an end to the “two hundred days of dread” there. It is possible, maybe even likely, that Chief Rabbi Herzog was aware of this speech. My thanks to Myron Chaitovsky for bringing it to my attention.

Much ink has been spilled in trying to determine who is responsible for authoring this particular formulation.¹² In addition, many have searched for sources or precedents for it and, indeed, very similar ones are found in the writings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook in a number of places. In an essay written while still living in Boisk in 1901–1902, just before his move to Jaffa, Rabbi Kook used the phrase, “*reishit tzemihat yeshuat Yisrael*, the first flowering of the salvation of Israel,” and in an essay penned in 1919–1920 he included the phrase, “*reishit tzemihat geulat ammenu*, the first flowering of the redemption of our people.”¹³ A number of his letters also contain this kind of language, although no one has yet found this identical phrase in his writings.¹⁴ To be sure, there were many, including Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who saw the State in very positive terms but did not perceive it in any way as messianic or redemptive.¹⁵ But this is not the message of the Prayer for the State of Israel. Regardless of who authored it, its meaning is crystal clear. The newly founded State

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12. There is a growing secondary literature on this phrase and its implications, as well as on other matters relevant to the Prayer for the State of Israel. The most comprehensive is Joel Rappel, *The Convergence of Politics and Prayer: Jewish Prayers for the Government and the State of Israel* (PhD thesis, Boston University, 2008).
13. See Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook, *Maamarei HaRaaya: Kovetz Maamarim* (Jerusalem, 1984), 321, 42. I have not found references to these formulations by Rabbi Kook cited in the secondary literature on this phrase. My thanks to Dr. Shnayer Z. Leiman for bringing them to my attention several years ago. For the latter phrase, see also Rabbi Moshe Tzevi Neriya, ed., *Moadei HaRaaya* (Jerusalem, 1984), 388.
14. These are cited regularly in the literature. See *Iggerot HaRaaya* (Jerusalem, 1985), vol. 2, 117, and vol. 3, 134: *reishit tzemihat yeshuatenu*; vol. 3, 130: *reishit hatza'ad shel tzemihat keren yeshuat Yisrael*. For more examples, see Ephraim Yair, “HaTefilla LiShlom HaMedina,” in Simḥa Raz, ed., *Kovetz HaTziyonut HaDatit* (Jerusalem, 1997), 379.
15. Many have addressed Rabbi Soloveitchik’s position. Among them see the article based on a lecture by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “Rav Soloveitchik’s Approach to Zionism,” *Alei Etzion* 14 (2006), 21–37, and Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem and New York, 2012), 276–98. See too the exchange between Rabbi Shubert Spero and Rabbi Norman Lamm in *Shma* 4/73 (May 3, 1974); Rabbi Yehuda Amital, “Lishmoa Kol Bikhyo shel Tinok,” *Alon Shevut leBogerei Yeshivat Har Etzion* 1 (Tevet 5754), 85.

of Israel is placed squarely in the forefront of the redemptive unfolding of the Jewish people.¹⁶

But the clear redemptive focus and message of this prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel is not limited only to this most well-known phrase; indeed it is present in less explicit, albeit highly significant, ways throughout. I want to draw attention here to only a few examples:

- Some of the biblical verses included in their totality in this prayer (Deut. 30:4–5), as well as some biblical words and phrases that appear there, also carry explicit redemptive connotations that make this connection obvious.¹⁷
- The prayer begins with the words: “Rock of Israel and its Redeemer.” The reference to God as “Rock of Israel” already appears in the Bible (II Sam. 23:3; Is. 30:29) and is most familiar from the last blessing of the *Shema* in the Morning Service. Its connection to redemption is clear from the fact that the paragraph that it begins ends with a reference to God as the “Redeemer of Israel.”

But the connection is stronger than that. After listing a number of themes to be mentioned in the *emet veyatziv* prayer following the morning *Shema* (e.g., the Exodus from Egypt, the kingship of God, the Splitting of the Sea and the Slaying of the Firstborn), the Talmud Yerushalmi states: “One must say: ‘Rock of Israel and its Redeemer.’”¹⁸ God is already described by this very title, “Rock of Israel and its Redeemer,” in this early source. In fact, some recited this phrase as the text for the blessing of redemption in the Evening Service for Holidays, and texts reflecting the custom in Eretz Yisrael indicate that this was the

16. Note also the triple hedge in a document dated January 21, 1949, some eight months after the founding of the State: נודה לר' על שובנו ברוב רחמיו וחסדיו לראות את הניצנים הראשונים של האתחלתא דגאולה עם הקמתה של מדינת ישראל, referring to the founding of the State of Israel as “the first buddings of the beginning of the redemption.” See Rabbi Menaḥem M. Kasher, *HaTekufa HaGedola*, 374. For other formulations, see Rabbi Yitzhak Dadon, ed., *At'halta Hi* (Jerusalem, 2006).

17. See Gilad Strauss, “HaMekorot LiTefilla LiShlom HaMedina,” *Shmaatin* 104–105 (1991), 87–88.

18. Yerushalmi, Berakhot 1:6.

case there all year round in the Morning and Evening Services as well.¹⁹ Clearly, the reference to God as “Rock of Israel” is intimately linked with redemption.

- But, for me, the most striking and significant part of the prayer that reflects a clear messianic or redemptive message are the two phrases that appear toward the beginning: “Spread over it the Tabernacle of Your peace” and “Direct them with good counsel before You.” It is clear that they both come from the *Hashkivenu* prayer recited as part of every Evening Service. But why invoke *Hashkivenu* and, more significantly, why two phrases from this same prayer? Surely many other texts could have served as sources for passages that would have been eminently appropriate to have been included in the Prayer for the State of Israel!

The Abudarham cites Rabbi Avraham HaYarhi, who notes that the phrase, “Spread over it the Tabernacle of Your peace,” in particular, has messianic connotations, citing the verses in Ezekiel (16:8): “I spread the hems of My garment over you,” and in Ruth (3:9): “Spread your robe over your maidservant, for you are a redeemer.”²⁰ However, the authors of this prayer may have wished to convey – via this double reference to *Hashkivenu* – a message based on a more familiar traditional text, a passage from

19. See Levi Ginzberg, *Perushim VeHiddushim BiYerushalmi* (New York, 1941), 217; *Bah, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 66, s.v., *uma shekatav vehotem*; *Taz, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 66:6; *Magen Avraham, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, 236, beginning. See also Yitzhak Moshe Elbogen, *HaTefilla BeYisrael BeHitpat’hutah HaHistorit* (Tel Aviv, 1972), 200; Rabbi Shelomo Yosef Zevin, *LeOr HaHalakha* (Jerusalem, 2004), 283; *Encyclopedia Talmudit*, vol. 4, column 407.

The phrase, “*mitokh bittahon beTzur Yisrael*, with trust in the Rock of Israel,” already appeared at the end of *Megillat HaAtzma’ut*, Israel’s Declaration of Independence, in a well-known attempt to compromise between those who wanted an overt reference to God in the document and those who were opposed to it. It also begins the prayer composed by Chief Rabbis Herzog and Uziel in honor of the seventy-fifth birthday of Israel President Chaim Weizmann in 1949. See the text published in Rabbi Shmuel Katz, “*MiMismakhei HaRabbanut HaRashit MiShenot Kum HaMedina*,” *Tehumin* 18 (1998), 490.

20. *Abudarham Hashalem* (Jerusalem, 1963), 141.

the beginning of the first tractate of the Talmud. The Talmud (Berakhot 4b) cites the opinion of R. Yoḥanan that the obligation to juxtapose redemption and prayer also applies during the Evening Service. The Gemara then questions: What about *Hashkivenu*? Does that paragraph not create an interruption between redemption (the blessing of *Ga'al Yisrael*) and prayer (the *Amida*)? The Gemara answers that once *Hashkivenu* was instituted, it is simply an extension of redemption and therefore is not considered an interruption.

Indeed, the significance of this notion is very clear in our context. *Hashkivenu* has the halakhic status of a *geula arikhta*, a drawn-out redemption, which is precisely how the authors of this prayer saw the newly established State of Israel. For them it was the first step of an extended redemption. It was redemption, but only the *reishit* of the *tzemihat*, the beginning of the flowering of the redemption. What better source than *Hashkivenu* could have reflected this fundamental principle, which mirrored the role the nascent State was playing in the unfolding of Jewish destiny? Not one, but two phrases from this prayer were deliberately included, I believe, to make this point. Redemption takes a while to achieve; redemption is a process.²¹

For the authors of this prayer who composed it in Israel's infancy, the State was *reishit tzemihat geulatenu*. As we celebrate Yom HaAtzma'ut these many years later, may we merit that the *reishit* will turn into the *tzemihah* and the *tzemihah* will turn into *geulatenu*, speedily, in our days.

21. Shlomo Sukenik, *Konena Aleinu: BeInyan HaTefilla LiShlom HaMedina* (Jerusalem, n.d.), 21–22, already recognized the *geula arikhta* character of *Hashkivenu* but interpreted its significance in a different way. Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, “Geulat Layla – Geula Arikhta,” in Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv, ed., *Hazon LaMoed* (Jerusalem, 1988), 95–96, interpreted this phrase as I did but did not apply it to the text of the *Tefilla LiShlom HaMedina*.

For more on the notion of redemption as a process, see my “Seeking Redemption in an Unredeemed World: Yosef at the Seder,” in *And You Shall Transmit to Your Children: A Pesach Haggadah* (New York, 2014), 25–30.

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