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RELIGIOUS ZIONISM AND THE MEANINGS OF REDEMPTION

Fifty years ago, on *Yom ha-Atsma'ut* of 1956, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik delivered a talk in the Nathan Lampert Auditorium of Yeshiva University in honor of the eighth anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. Those days and months were tense ones for the young Jewish State and for Jews all over the world. Egypt had begun to orchestrate a series of guerilla attacks against Israel in the previous August (1955). The following month, Israel had retaliated, and tensions began to escalate. By October, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had decided that war was the only option, and Israel launched a series of attacks against Egyptian and Syrian positions. American foreign policy, however, was not supportive of this effort. The Eisenhower administration was interested in influencing Egypt and its president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, to move out of the Soviet bloc and, in February 1956, was noncommittal with regard to Israel's strongly worded request for American arms. The administration held firm in not approving sales of US weapons while violence between Israel and Egypt continued to escalate. On *Yom ha-Atsma'ut*, April 15, 1956, the same day that the Rav delivered his address, Ben-Gurion publicly warned the Israelis that the Egyptians were planning "to slaughter" them and vowed that Israel would retaliate "two blows to one."¹

The Rav's words, read first and published later, resonate today as strongly as they undoubtedly did then. His insistence that one who is suffering should focus exclusively on what obligation that suffering imposes rather than try to explain why it occurred, on the "ethico-halakhic" dimension of Judaism rather than its "speculative-metaphysical" one, and his concomitant analysis of the Job story, are as relevant today as they were fifty years ago. His poetic and passionate evocation of the story of the Shulammitte maiden in *Shir ha-Shirim*, and his moving description of the six divine "knocks" on the door of the Jewish people in 1948 in the form of the founding of the State of Israel and the obliga-

tion they impose on Diaspora Jewry vis-à-vis the State, are even more necessary and powerful today, when a combination of factors continue to threaten Israel, from without as well as from within. And finally, the Rav's formulation of the two covenants, the Egyptian covenant of fate and the Sinaitic covenant of destiny, continues to be helpful in an effort to define the parameters of Jewish unity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. None of these fundamental positions need to be reworked, only more fully understood.

I have been told that R. Soloveitchik considered the first part of this essay (which dealt with Job and theodicy) as his most significant contribution, but, as the editor's introduction to this symposium indicates, this lecture/essay gained its widest currency as "a classic of religious-Zionism." The framing of "*kol dodi dofek*," the "knock" at the beginning of the fifth chapter of *Shir ha-Shirim*, as a manifestation from Above expressed in the founding of the State of Israel has resonated with readers for the last fifty years. But I have often wondered why the Rav chose to use a text from that particular book as the fundamental biblical anchor for his position. Could he not have just as easily invoked verses from virtually every biblical book to construct a religious-Zionist ideology, beginning with God's promise to Abraham in *Parashat Lekh Lekha*? Why *Shir ha-Shirim*?

I have long speculated that perhaps the Rav deliberately chose *Shir ha-Shirim* as the primary text for his pro-Zionist position because it was precisely that biblical work that served as the *locus classicus* for the opposite, anti-Zionist position. The talmudic passage of the "three oaths" (*Ketubbot* 111a), long cited as outlawing an active Jewish return to the Holy Land and turned into the foundational text of anti-Zionists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is based on verses in *Shir ha-Shirim*.² Perhaps, I thought, the Rav subtly chose to score a polemical point by basing his pro-Zionist position on the very same text used by his opponents.

However, in preparing my book on the Rav's teachings on *Tish'a be-Av*,³ I noticed that one year the Rav cited R. Yehuda ha-Levi's *Kuzari* (2:24) as the source for understanding these verses from *Shir ha-Shirim* in the context of the refusal of the *benei Yisra'el* to return to their land. The Rav refers explicitly to this text later in the work (n. 9), but, in fact, I now believe that it is the source for the entire section. Ha-Levi writes:

Divine Providence was ready to restore everything as it had been at

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first, if they had all willingly consented to return [after the destruction of the First Temple]. But only a part was ready to do so, whilst the majority and aristocracy remained in Babylon, preferring dependence and slavery, and unwilling to leave their homes and their affairs. An allusion to them might be found in the enigmatic words of Solomon, "I sleep, but my heart waketh" (Song of Songs 5:2). He designates the exile by sleep, and the continuance of prophecy among them by the wakefulness of the heart. "It is the voice of my Beloved that knocketh" means God's call to return; "My head is filled with dew" alludes to the *Shekhina* that emerged from the shadow of the Temple. The words, "I have put off my coat" refer to the people's slothfulness in consenting to return. The sentence, "My Beloved stretcheth forth his hand through the opening" may be interpreted as the urgent call of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Prophets until a portion of the people grudgingly responded to their invitation. . . . Divine Providence only gives man as much as he is prepared to receive; if his receptive capacity be small, he obtains little.

Substitute America for "Babylon," eight years after the founding of the State of Israel for "after the destruction of the First Temple," and R. Soloveitchik for "Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Prophets," and you have an uncanny formulation of the Rav's argument expressed in this essay.

But current events in Israel have greatly muffled the sound of those "divine knocks." Feelings of disillusionment, despair, depression, betrayal, anger, and bitterness permeate a substantial portion of the religious-Zionist community in Israel and in the Diaspora. Homes have been destroyed, synagogues bulldozed, cemeteries uprooted, and dreams shattered. Voices declare, "No longer can we refer to the State as *reshit tsemit hat ge'ullatenu*" in the face of Jews evicting other Jews from their homes.

And it is precisely in this atmosphere that the words of R. Soloveitchik, in a different but related context, can provide a context for hope. One *Tish'a be-Av* the Rav shared a thought that speaks directly to the contemporary mood. In one of his *kinot*, beginning with the words "*Eikha et asher kevar asuhu*," R. Elazar ha-Kalir writes that Moses' shoulders trembled when asked by God to take the Jews out of Egypt. Moses said to Him, "Assign this mission to the one whom You will send" (Ex. 4:13), who ha-Kalir identifies as Elijah the Prophet in this *kina*.⁴ "Why send me," said Moses, "if, anyway, afterwards You are going to send Elijah the Prophet to redeem them?" The Rav pointed out that the source for the identification of Elijah as the individual Moses here had in mind for God to send to redeem the Jewish people from Egypt is a statement in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* (chapter 40).

How do we understand the reluctance on the part of Moses to help his fellow Jews? How could Moses not jump at this opportunity to finally redeem his brothers and sisters from Egyptian bondage? Why did he obstinately and, on the face of it, intemperately, argue with God for an entire week (Ex. 3:6-4:17; *Shemot Rabba* 3:14, *Va-Yikra Rabba* 11:6)? Was Moses callous and indifferent to their fate with which he was intimately familiar? God forbid! After all, he had already placed himself in mortal danger by engaging in an act of helping a Jew, which forced him to leave Egypt afraid for his life (Ex. 2:11-15)! Clearly Moses was not a distant, disinterested, and insensitive observer.

The answer is—said the Rav in interpreting the reference to Elijah first in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer* and then in the *kina*—that of course the opposite was the case. On the contrary, Moses loved the Jewish people, cared about them, and was prepared to do whatever he could to help them. However, he foresaw that his mission to take the Jews out of Egypt would not result in their ultimate redemption. He saw that the Jewish people would be redeemed from Egypt and would enjoy many years of freedom, glory, and happiness, but he also foresaw that afterward they would be exiled and enslaved again. He understood that whatever he or his student Joshua would be able to accomplish in *erets Yisra'el* would at some point be destroyed. He understood very well that he was being sent not to bring about the final redemption, but a redemption that would, in turn, be followed by a destruction, and then followed yet again by another redemption–destruction cycle. And so, said Moses, “What is the point for me to go now and tell the Egyptian king to free them? What benefit will they derive from my mission if, after me, You will have to send someone else anyway? If I am the instrument of their redemption, they will only be enslaved again, albeit not in Egypt but in many other places. There will be first one, shorter exile and then a second, much longer exile. The Jews, Your children, will experience the devastation of the Ten Martyrs of the second century, the Crusades of the end of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Black Death of the fourteenth century, the Chmielnicki Massacres of the seventeenth century, the Holocaust of the twentieth century, and Jews being blown up in buses on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv in the twenty-first century!” Therefore, said Moses, “Just send Elijah the Prophet right now and be done with it. He is the harbinger of the ultimate and final redemption; once he arrives, there will no longer be destruction or exile or torture or disaster or cataclysm ever again!”

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But God answered Moses that his perception of redemption was wrong. Redemption is not black-and-white, straightforward, linear, unambiguous, and inexorable; rather, it is complicated, circuitous, and ambiguous. Yes, at the end of days, to usher in the eschatological era, God will send Elijah; but for now, said He to Moses, He wants to send him to redeem *kelal Yisra'el*.

In a word, echoing the famous phrase of “*kim'a kim'a*” in the Midrash as well as in the Jerusalem Talmud,⁵ redemption is a process. Sometimes it is more obvious and easier to see, and sometimes it is more difficult. The voice of our Beloved knocked in 1948 and in 1967, and continues to knock today as well. May the sounds of that knock grow louder and louder.

NOTES

1. See Isaac Alteras, *Eisenhower and Israel: U.S.-Israeli Relations, 1953-1960* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1993), 157-82.
2. See Aviezer Ravitzky, *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. by Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 211-34, and especially the bibliography presented on p. 287, n. 9.
3. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “*The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*”: *Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kinot*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Jersey City: Ktav, 2006).
4. Abraham Rosenfeld, *The Authorised Kinot for the Ninth of Av*, 2nd ed. (London: I. Labworth, 1965), 107; Avrohom Chaim Feuer and Avie Gold, *The Complete Tishah B'Av Service* (Brooklyn, NJ: Mesorah Publications: 1992), 202. The Rav rarely recited this *kina*.
5. *Midrash Rabba*, *Shir ha-Shirim* 6:10; *Midrash Tehillim* 18:37; *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Devarim* 1; Yerushalmi, *Berakhot* 1:1, *Yoma* 3:2.