YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Yom Ha-atzma’ut**

**“Rejoice in the Lord and Be Glad”**

**By Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l***

Translated by Kaeren Fish

“Salvation is unto the Lord – Your blessing be upon Your people, Selah” (*Tehillim* 3:9). When God brings salvation, *Am Yisrael* is obligated to acknowledge and bless Him. Indeed, *Chazal*interpret the phrase “*al ammekha birkhatekha*” in the verse cited above to mean, “Your people must bless You” (*Pesikta*, *nispachim*, 2). This requirement is also derived from a verse in the Torah: “Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang this song to God, and they said, *leimor*” (*Shemot* 15:1). The word “*leimor*,” usually translated as “saying,” seems redundant. In fact, *Chazal* tell us, it is meant to teach that future generations are told “to say” (*Shemot Rabba* 23:12). When we experience salvation and miracles, the accompanying obligation is, “Sing to him, praise Him, speak of all His wonders” (*Tehillim* 105:2).

            Not only must one sing in praise, but one must want to sing! Rashi explains that the word “*az*” in “*Az yashir Moshe*, Then Moshe sang” means that when Moshe witnessed the miracle of the splitting of the Sea, he was inspired to sing.

            But in order for a person to sing – and certainly in order for him to want to sing – there is a precondition of faith. He must believe that the tremendous events taking place are indeed “acts of God” in the simplest sense, and he must believe that all that God does is ultimately good. The intensity and power of the song are proportional to the depth of faith. We recite in the daily morning prayers, “And they believed in God and in Moshe, His servant – Then Moshe sang…” By virtue of their faith, the Divine spirit rested upon them and they uttered their holy song. “They believed His words; they sang His praise” (*Tehillim* 106:12).

            This is not faith that comes from deep study, nor the faith that arises from special insight and learned knowledge. It is the simple, wholehearted faith that is the portion of every Jew, of one who can recite chapters of *Tehillim* with great devotion, without even understanding the words. “Out of the mouths of infants and sucklings You have founded strength” (*Tehillim*8:3) – the Gemara (*Sota* 30b) teaches that when God was revealed at the Red Sea, even infants and sucklings lifted their heads and offered praise. One need not be a learned scholar, and there is no need for complicated philosophy. All that is required is simple feeling, familiar to every child. Even a young child senses what suffering is; even he recognizes the distress caused by great distance. “Out of distress I called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me with expansiveness” (*Tehillim* 118:5).

            The *Shulchan* *Arukh* states that if a person finds something which he had lost, he must recite the blessing of “*ha-tov ve-ha-metiv.*” This *halakha* applies even if the king will confiscate all of his property if he discovers this item in his possession. If he starts calculating whether he should in fact recite the blessing, whether the fact that he now possesses the item is good for him or more trouble than it is worth, he will worry that the blessing may in fact be in vain. Simple faith, on the other hand, dictates otherwise: “Shout for joy, all who are upright in heart” (*Tehillim*32:11) – if I have merited some good, I must declare God’s blessings, regardless of what may happen in the future.

            There is another *halakha* that if one’s father dies and he inherits his estate, he must recite two blessings – both “*dayan ha-emet*” and “*she-hechiyanu.*” If one has been the beneficiary of some goodness, even if it is tied up with evil, then “Sing to Him, give praise to Him.”

            When we speak of the song that we must recite on Yom Ha-Atzma’ut for the miracles and wonders that God has done for us, there is no need for philosophy and no need for Zionism. We need not know God’s ways, nor the mysteries of redemption. The first principle is simple, wholehearted faith.

            God gave us this land as an inheritance. Until 1948, tens of thousands of our brethren, survivors, tried to reach *Eretz Yisrael*, and they were turned away. Some found their deaths in detention camps and others drowned. Finally, the gates of *Eretz Yisrael* were opened with the establishment of the State of Israel, and tens of thousands of Jews were able to enter. Are any calculations necessary? Is there any need for ideology? “They believed His words, they sang His praise” (*Tehillim* 106:12) – how is it possible not to sing?

            For nearly two thousand years, Jews were not able to settle in the land which was promised to us as an inheritance. In the dark of night, “tower and stockade” settlements were set up because the gentile rulers of the land had decided that Jews could not purchase land beyond certain locations. And this day came, and now Jews are entitled, permitted, and obligated to settle everywhere. Does song not burst forth of its own accord? Does this reality not clearly require thanksgiving? Is there room for calculations?

            We need only lift our heads, like an infants who lifted their heads at the Red Sea, and declare, “I shall sing to the Lord.” No calculations are necessary – only simple faith. “Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, O righteous ones, and shout for joy all who are upright in heart” (*Tehillim* 32:11)!

            Consider the processes that were involved the wonder of Israel’s independence: the great miracle of having East and West – sworn enemies – acting jointly to establish sovereignty in Israel; the wicked leaders who came to regret their former actions; the wars and the salvations. During the siege of Jerusalem, the very last rations of dry *matzot* had already been distributed – two *matzot* per person – and that was the very end. There was no water to distribute, because the gentiles could not agree that sovereignty would indeed be established in Israel. And then came the great salvation, the sense of expansiveness that followed the period of pressure and distress: “Out of distress I called upon the Lord; the Lord answered me with expansiveness.”

            One who approaches life with simple, wholehearted faith is obligated to give praise. And one who makes calculations is deficient in his faith.

            Due to our many sins, there are many people for whom the distinction between the actions of God and the actions of man has become blurred. For if we do not sing to God, if we do not praise Him and thank Him, then it is as if we are attributing all that happened not to God, but rather to human action. Who did all of this, if not God? If it was God, then give thanks. If you do not give thanks, then answer the question: Who did all of this? Was it human action that brought all of this about?

            Here we become embroiled in distorted accounting. If all of this is attributable to human action, then we begin to do human accounting of all the injustices of human action. But what does all of this have to do with God’s actions? Why are human actions involved in our perspective on what God has done for us? “Indeed, great are the acts of our God,” as we declare on Yom Kippur. When the line is blurred, when we speak in the same breath of human actions and God’s actions, we undermine that consciousness, that simple and wholehearted faith that God’s actions are indeed great.

            The *gemara* teaches:

R. Elazar said: What is the meaning of the verse, “Who has despised the day of small things?” (*Zekharia* 4:10)? [It means,] Who has caused the reward of the righteous in the World to Come to be despoiled? It was their own smallness of faith, in that they did not have faith in God. (*Sota* 48b)

How can people be described as “righteous” if they do not have faith in God? The context of the verse in *Zekharia* is the key to understanding the apparent paradox:

The hands of Zerubavel have laid the foundation of this house, and his hands shall also finish it, and you shall know that the Lord of Hosts has sent me to you. For who has despised the day of small things? For they shall see with joy the plummet in the hand of Zerubavel; these seven, which are the eyes of the Lord, running to and fro throughout the land. (*Zekharia* 4:9-10)

**Rashi**: “For who has despised the day” – upon which the foundations were laid for the Temple, which was scorned in their eyes, as it is written, “And many of the *kohanim*… who had seen the First Temple, wept with a great voice when the foundation for this Temple was laid before their eyes” (*Ezra* 3:12), and in the prophecy of Chaggai, “Is it [the beginnings of the Second Temple] not as nothing in your eyes?” (*Chaggai*2:3).

It is specifically the *tzaddikim*, those with great expectations, who have “despised the day of small things,” scorning Zerubavel’s building and risking a slide into lack of faith in God, forgetting the injunction, “You shall know that the Lord of Hosts has sent me to you” (*Zekharia* 4:9). They have forgotten that all that happens in this world is under divine providence. When the distinction between human actions and God’s actions becomes blurred, we arrive at a small-minded, constricted view in the present as well as diminished reward in the World to Come, as *Chazal* taught. “Who has caused the reward of the righteous in the World to Come to be despoiled?” The entire richness that should have been theirs is squandered, for they did not have faith in God.

            The most fundamental requirement is simple faith. For if a person starts making an accounting, if he tries to set down the ways of God in this world and the processes of redemption, dictating how God should save Israel, then he cannot sing. *Chazal* taught that King Chizkiyahu should have uttered a song of praise over the fall of Sancheriv:

“But Chizkiyahu did not respond in accordance with the good that had been done for him, for his heart was proud” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 32:25). Chizkiyahu was a king and a righteous man; how can we say “his heart was proud”? What this means is that he was too proud to utter a song of praise. Yeshayahu came to Chizkiyahu and said to him, “Sing to God” (*Yeshayahu* 12:5). He answered, “Why?” [Yeshayahu continued,] “For He has done exalted things.” [Chizkiyahu justified himself, using the continuation of the same verse] saying, “This is known throughout the earth.” R. Abba Bar Kahana said: Chizkiyahu said: The Torah which I am engaged in is an atonement [substitute] for the song. (*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*4:3)

Why do I need to sing, said Chizkiyahu, I am engaged in Torah study. What is the *chiddush* here, he asked, what’s so impressive? When the verse says that Chizkiyahu’s “heart was proud,” it means that things didn’t go exactly as he wanted them to, as he had imagined that they would, as he believed that they should, as he understood God’s ways. He therefore refrained from uttering praise. The redemption was not to his liking, and he therefore did not sing.

            The first precondition for song is, “They believed His word; they sang His praise” – simple, wholehearted faith, without any accounting.

            It is only after that most fundamental sense of gratitude that we can move on to look beyond the most immediate events. We can look at the great salvation not only for the Jews who were living in the land, but the great salvation for all of *Am Yisrael*.  One cannot even imagine what would have happened to all of those survivors had it not been for this hope, had the State of Israel not arisen.

            In my neighborhood, there is a 98 year old man who made *aliya* from Russia just three months ago. He told me that when he applied to emigrate, the senior clerk there told him, “You’re an old man! Are you going to betray your homeland now by moving to Israel?” He told me in Russian what he responded to that clerk, and even though I understood only a few words, what I heard from him was truly a “*shir ha-shirim*!” He said, “There’s an autonomous Georgia; there’s an autonomous Ukraine; there’s an autonomous Russia; there’s an autonomous Armenia; there’s an autonomous Israel.” It took the Six Day War for him to grasp that there’s an autonomous Israel. Tens of thousands of Jews may understand nothing else but this concept of “an autonomous Israel.” And they are returning to us by virtue of this day.

            Let us also recall the self-sacrifice of our heroic brethren whose blood was spilled for the sake of *Eretz Yisrael*. *Chazal*teach us that it is because of the sin of “They despised the pleasant land” (*Tehillim* 106:24) that the exile persists.  This day is the beginning of the atonement for that sin. When our brothers’ blood was spilled for the sake of conquering *Eretz Yisrael*, for the sake of love of the “pleasant land,” “He forgave His land and His people” (*Devarim* 32:43).

            After we consider all of this, after we approach with simple faith, we open the *Tanakh* and read:

At that time, a gift shall be brought to the Lord of Hosts, a bruised nation, a people terrible from their beginning onward; a nation mighty and treading, whose land the rivers have divided, to the place of the Name of the Lord of Hosts, Mount Zion. (*Yeshayahu* 18:7)

Let us look around at what is happening in front of our eyes. Are we not watching this verse play out in reality? “A bruised nation, a people terrible…” – whose lot has been terrible events. “From their beginning onward; a nation mighty and treading, whose land the rivers have divided” – kings have plundered their land, but now they are returning to it. Can we view this through any perspective but a messianic one?

            Let us consider a different source:

Prophesy therefore concerning the Land of Israel, and say to the mountains and to the hills, to the streams and to the valleys. So says the Lord God: Behold, I have spoken in My jealousy and in My fury, because you have suffered the insult of the nations. Therefore, thus says the Lord God: I have lifted up My hand, swearing that the nations round about you shall bear their own insult. But you, O mountains of Israel – you shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people of Israel, for they will soon be coming. (*Yechezkel* 36:6-8)

Is there any more openly revealed redemption than this?

R. Chiya the great and R. Shimon ben Chalafta were walking on the way in the valley of Arbel, and they saw the dawning of the morning star. R. Chiya said: Such is the redemption of Israel; it progresses bit by bit, and as it progresses, it grows greater. (*Esther Rabba* 10:14)

            Redemption progresses gradually, and *Chazal*tell us that even when the Mashiach comes, there will still be wars. Whether we define our period as “the beginning of the dawn of our redemption” or “redemption bit by bit” is merely a question of semantics.

            There is special importance in viewing these events in their messianic perspective, for two reasons. First, “Be comforted; be comforted, My people:” there is no greater consolation than the fact that things are indeed moving. We are entering a stage from which there is no retreat. It is a stage which includes suffering, a stage in which there is still war, but things are moving. The rebirth of our sovereignty is not a passing episode. We have no way of knowing; decades may pass before people begin to understand something of what has transpired in the depths of the Jewish soul that lives on after the Holocaust. How great and terribly deep is that scar on the Jewish psyche! After the Holocaust, if we were to say to the Jews, “Now there comes a period of rest, another brief episode,” this would be no comfort. The comfort is that something is indeed starting. If we view things from the messianic perspective, there is no retreat.

            When R. Herzog, of blessed memory, returned from the United States in the midst of the Second World War, as the Germans were about to invade *Eretz Yisrael* and the Jews here were despairing, he said, “We have a tradition that there will be no third Destruction!” This, to his view, was the beginning of the Third Commonwealth. That is what it means to view matters from the messianic perspective, to view them as described by the prophets.

            Second, this fact of redemption proceeding bit by bit demands something of us. If we were told, “Bring the Messiah,” we would say, “In what way are we any better than the previous generations? Are we more righteous than they? They didn’t manage to bring the Messiah; how shall we? What are our actions in comparison with the actions of our forefathers?” But if we are told that we are living right now in the generation of the redemption, that the weight and value of our actions is different from the weight of any action undertaken in previous generations, then matters take on a whole new meaning.

            So said the holy Ari to his student, R. Chaim Vital:

Know that the making of a soul’s grandeur is dependent not upon the person, but rather upon the time and the generation. For a small action in this generation is equivalent to several *mitzvot* in other generations, because in our times the *kelippot* are completely overpowering, which was not so in the early generations.

If we know that we are living in the generation of redemption, it gives us strength. We are capable of bringing the final redemption because our actions assume a different importance. We breathe different air; we live in a great period, requiring great actions.

            “Attribute greatness to the Lord with me, and let us exalt His Name together” (*Tehillim* 34:4). Although there are still elements of this faith that we are living through the stages of redemption that are hidden from us, we are required to act. Our expectations and our speech must be different. The redemption is proceeding bit by bit in front of our very eyes; that demands things of us. Therefore, there must be continuous emphasis on the Messiah. In our generation, there are pious and religious individuals who talk about all kinds of things – but make no mention of the Messiah!

“[A psalm] unto the chief musician, unto David, for invocation – God, to my salvation” (*Tehillim* 70:1-2). How can we describe David’s position? We may bring a metaphor of a king who had a herd of sheep, and he grew angry at them. He threw them out, and took apart the sheep pen, and had the shepherd removed. After some time, he gathered up the sheep and rebuilt the pen, but made no mention of the shepherd. The shepherd said: See – the sheep have been gathered in, and the sheepfold is rebuilt, but as for myself – no mention is made of me. (*Midrash Tehillim* 70:1)

            We must pray that the process will be shortened, that Jewish blood will not be spilled, that the birth-pangs of the Messiah will be lessened – but out of faith that we are within the stages of redemption. Then our prayers will be different, our Torah will be different, our expectations will be different – for we will be living in the generation of the Messiah. We shall give praise to God with all our hearts: “Sing to Him, praise Him, speak of all His wonders.”

(This sicha was delivered on Yom Ha-atzma'ut 1973.)