

Israel at Sixty: A Time for Reflection

Upon the marking of sixty years to the founding of the State of Israel, I hope you will indulge me in a few reflections. A strange irony presents itself. The return to our homeland was undoubtedly the greatest event in two thousand years of Jewish history, the perennial dream of generation after generation. I imagine many of my ancestors, who prayed every day to return to Zion, while secretly sensing that this eventuality was as realistic as the eventuality that God would take us on wings of eagles. Of course, only a little more than a century ago, Herzl upon returning from the first Zionist Congress in Basel was mocked by his friends as the 'future head of state'.¹ The return to Zion was simply relegated to the messianic age, an eschatological time 'beyond history', not the stuff of *realpolitik*. Notwithstanding, the stuff of fantasy *has* become the stuff of history.

This irony reveals itself in listening to the discourse often used in the Jewish community in discussing this great historical event. All too often it reflects the most narrow definition of this return, forgetting how this return was linked into the historical imagination of the Jewish people for millennia. The return to Zion was linked to a master narrative through which we as Jews have always understood ourselves, a narrative of cosmic exile and redemption. Our physical exile marked the eclipse of the Divine, the banishment from Eden, and the price for an unredeemed world. Physical brokenness was simply the metaphor of a broken world, and Jewish suffering was a testimony of man's inhumanity to man, a world devoid of the *tzelem elokim*. Conversely, the desire to return to our homeland was from the earliest times embedded in an understanding which linked Jewish return to a universal movement of history back to God. The Temple in Jerusalem was the locus of the entire world, the place from where all existence unfolded (Yoma 54b), and from that place the light of God was to spread to all peoples. Like the idyllic Eden, the Divine rivers were to flow from Zion to the entire world (Micah 4). Zion is more than a place (although it is definitely that too); it is an idea which tapped into the most idealistic core of the Jewish personality for a perfected world. The kingdom of God is not in the next world, but right here on earth; redemption is collective and historical, the product of an active engagement in the real world of politics and human relations. This in my mind has always been the great Jewish idea.

I do not hear these visions however. Instead, historical anti-Semitism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the shadow of the Holocaust dominate the discussion. How many lectures focus upon the geopolitical issues? How often do we speak of rescue and relief? On the other hand, how often do American Jews learn about Zion as the product of the collective yearning and dreams of the Jewish people for a redeemed world, and study the thinkers throughout the century who articulated these visions? I am not saying that these idealistic values do not inform our work- because they certainly do; however, rarely are they invoked in articulate ways that I think can move and inspire the next generation of Jews.

Now please do not misunderstand me; in a world of Islamic terror and a nuclear Iran the argument for Jewish protection remains as significant as it was (unfortunately) 60 years

¹ Quoted in Amnon Rubinstein, "Zionisms' Compatriots", Azure 16 (Winter 2004): 111

ago, especially when many of the intelligentsia undertake a project of delegitimizing Jewish national aspirations altogether. Indeed Israel is a refuge, as the political Zionists argued, and in this world the existence of Israel is critical. Jewish powerlessness in this world we live in is akin to national suicide.

However, consider the fact that fundamentally the argument implies that our State was grounded in the inability of the Jewish people to find refuge in their host communities; in other words, Jewish self-realization did not by definition need a return to Zion. Of course, this turns the bulk of traditional Jewish thought and theology on its head (with a few notable exceptions, specifically early Reform thought). Jewish self-realization has always been collective, achievable only through the creation of a polity which reflects a 'kingdom of priests and holy nation'. Exile was not simply the state of Jewish powerlessness; it was the alienation of the Jewish people from their *raison d'etre*. Of course, maybe I am just reiterating the argument between the political and cultural/religious Zionists, but even after a century, this debate still has not taken center stage. Some Israeli scholars even now claim that this debate is passé or dead, or even worse, that Zionism was illegitimate from its birth. I however, refuse to give into this pessimism. Even after sixty years, we have achieved great things, but we are still in our national infancy. What does it mean to create a Jewish State? What does it mean to return to Zion?

The Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise of anti-Semitism again threatens to push this existential debate to the sidelines, but for an American Jewish community whose attachment to Israel decreases by the year and for whom anti-Semitism is a phenomenon that is largely academic, this discussion is crucial. While this conversation has occurred among many academics, rabbis, and intellectuals (mainly in Israel), I think it high time to engage *Amcha* in this most important conversation.

... I know what books are sitting by my bed.