

What Is It That We Celebrate When We Celebrate Yom Haatzmaut

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One of the most important and problematic transitions made by contemporary Zionism is the transformation from a national movement to a state. This of course occurred on 5 Iyar, 1948. Today, as believers and as religious Zionists, we can comprehend just how difficult this transition was.

As religious Zionists, we completely identified with the Jewish national movement: the return to the land of our ancestors, building it, deepening our Hebrew-Jewish roots – all are phenomena that can be identified as steps on the path to a complete Redemption.

However, a state, especially a modern state like the State of Israel, appears to be an entirely different matter. It is made up of many different people and movements: both religious people and committed Zionists, but also secular people, leftists and post-Zionists. Beyond that, its central framework of affiliation is that of citizenship – and non-Jewish national and religious minorities, as well as immigrants who may not be Jewish, also share in it. Beyond that is the fact that public life in this state is characterized not only by heroism and commitment, but also by corruption, willingness to give up parts of Eretz Israel and incompetent management.

But despite all this, we mark Independence Day as a holiday, including the holding of special holiday services and the reciting of the *Hallel* prayer. One might ask: What is the point?

We can find an answer to this query if we take a closer look at the paradox embodied in the concept of nation-state, which is in many cases the outcome of a national movement's struggle for a state. The concept of a nation is a limiting one: A nation is a specific, particular thing – usually people with very specific ties involving a common language, culture and history. However, the concept of a state also points in an entirely different direction – to that of universality and

generality: States, especially modern ones, are universal frameworks: They include and are binding upon all its residents and citizens – in taxes, obeying the law and the services it provides to all, regardless of political perspective, extraction or even religion or nationality. And this is indeed what our Declaration of Independence says:

“The State of Israel [...] will uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens, without distinction of race, creed or sex...”

Both Rabbis Kook, of blessed memory, elevated the spiritual element contained in the general, universal nature of the state, and demonstrated that it is the very general universality of the state that embodies aspects of the universal nature of G-d. As Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook and Rabbi Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook wrote, the kingdom of G-d is revealed in the world when the divine ideals of righteousness, justice and peace are embodied and realized within the Kingdom of Israel; however, in order for the Kingdom of Israel to truly become the kingdom of the entirety of the Jewish people, rather than of only a few isolated Israelis (Jews) or a particular sector, it must include all of the Jewish people. Only in this way will it become a terrestrial reflection of the Jewish people as a spiritual entity (*Knesset Yisrael*).

Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook expressed this idea in one of the most well-known passages in his writing:

“The absolute divine ideal governs there and reanimates the people and the land in the light of its life so that all may know that far from being confined to wise, saintly, ascetic and devout individuals, the religious ideal may embrace an entire culturally and politically advanced nation including the intellectual, artistic, and pious, and extending to the broadest social, political and economic strata, not excepting even the proletariat in all its forms. (Orot p. 104).

The meaning of this excerpt is that the divine ideal and the Kingdom of G-d can realize themselves only in a state (“the political entity”) because the state is the broadest and most comprehensive framework of human organization. The

comprehensiveness of the state touches not only on the type of professions and on socioeconomic status (“even the proletariat in all its forms”), but also on the various political and ideological perspectives (“extending to the broadest social, political and economic strata”). And Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook maintained that the “members of our community” and “heroes of our holy army” were imbued with their salvation and valor when establishing the state because they were representatives of the comprehensive public life of the Jewish nation. Only in this way could “this spirit of valor continue from the source of the soul of Knesset Yisrael in its entirety” (“On the validity of the holiness of our Independence Day,” *Lenetivot Yisrael*, I, pp. 248-250).

It is quite difficult for our community to swallow this idea, because on some level, it runs counter to naïve religious thinking. It maintains that it is the most mundane bureaucratic aspects of the state, for example the fact that everyone must pay income tax, that all are required to serve in the army (or be exempted by law), that everyone votes and has an opinion (including leftists and post-Zionists, anarchists that demonstrate against the fence in Bil’in, supporters of the Open House, etc.), are the guarantee that the State of Israel is the embodiment of the Jewish nation and *Knesset Yisrael*. Thus, it is the universal bureaucratic framework that we celebrate on Independence Day, because it is that aspect that leads to the Kingdom of G-d. Moreover, it is the egalitarian-democratic nature of the state that advances its inclusive nature, its ability to contain everyone. It is the democratic aspect that makes the State of Israel into a reflection of *Knesset Yisrael* and the Kingdom of G-d. If the state were to discriminate and exclude a group, or even a single individual, because of their opinion or extraction, the state would not then be “the foundation of G-d’s throne in the world.” [G-d’s throne = *Knesset Yisrael*].

However, as we have noted, the civil framework is broader than just the Jewish nation; it includes other religious and national minorities too. Are they also part of the Kingdom of G-d?

I suggest that in order to be able to realize the divine ideal of the State of Israel, we need to contend with the presence of non-Jews too. Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook taught us that lying at the basis of the holiness of the Torah is natural morality – and that natural morality must serve as a “substratum for those great influences that come from the power of the Torah” (Orot Hatorah, Chapter 12).

The way that we treat our fellow Jews is regulated in the vast majority of cases by Torah commandments – largely general commandments that include numerous individual commandments such as “Love thy neighbor as thyself” and “And thou shalt do that which is right and good.” The treatment of non-Jews is regulated by natural morality. Non-Jews should be related to with the fairness and equity demanded by natural morality, in the sense that “appropriate ethical and moral conduct is a prerequisite for Torah.”

It would appear that this is what the Torah is referring to in commandments such as “And if a stranger should sojourn with you in your land, you shall do him no wrong [...] you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19: 34), because the essence of these commandments is to remember that we were once strangers in the land of Egypt and that we should refrain from treating strangers in our land, be they righteous converts or non-Jewish residents, in a similar fashion, as can be understood from the words of Ibn Ezra there. And regarding this matter too, we should remember the actions of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda who protested against teenagers that were harassing Arab peddlers, “*because of the essence of the Torah of Judaism and its morality*” (From “Talks with Rabbi Zvi Yehuda,” edited by Rabbi S. Aviner on the subject of the non-Jew living among Jews in the land).

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