

CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT IN ISRAEL

TRANSLATION

ON THE MEANING OF THE YOM KIPPUR WAR

by

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For the Jew who believes that the events which affect the life of the Jewish people are guided by Divine Providence, it is natural to ask what are the meaning and significance of such events. The question being raised in these times is: what is the significance of the Yom Kippur War? It is a question asked in the confident belief that we are living in a period of *atchalta de-ge'ulah*, the dawn of redemption. Against the background of this belief, and of the Six Day War — from which we learned that this war did indeed have a concrete purpose: the conquest of the Land — a dual question arises:

a) What was the purpose of the recent war? Indeed, the Land was already in our hands.

b) More pointedly: is this not a regression? Does the outbreak of the war not raise the possibility that what we have here is a kind of retreat from the Divine course of redemption?

Having said this, what, in the aftermath of the war, may we expect of the future? Only a prophet can answer; but these are the questions asked by all of us who are schooled in the belief that we stand indeed at the dawn of redemption.

All the misfortunes and sufferings which have afflicted the people of Israel down through the ages — including pre-messianic trials and tribulations which herald a great birth — all these are not inescapable: the birth can come without them. If we are fortunate we can attain great things without such pain; if not, they come with suffering. In the light of the events of our times it is clear that we are at a stage of “redemption through suffering”, but the very possibility that redemption may come in other ways imposes on us a halakhic obligation related to this specific time, namely that of contri-

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tion. The fact that redemption *can* come without suffering, and that suffering nevertheless accompanies it, imposes upon us the obligation of moral introspection and reflection on our actions in the knowledge that the Almighty expects of us repentance.

Unfortunately, for some time now there has taken root in at least a significant part of religious Jewish circles the conviction that repentance is a precept incumbent upon others. One hears it at every turn: that the outbreak of the war and its consequences are due to the sins of the people of Israel, and especially of those Jews, of those military men, of those political leaders, in whose every declaration there finds expression the conceit of "my power and the might of my hand".

Firstly, this saying does not relate to arms or war; it relates to property, houses, a life of ease (Deut. 8:12-17). But we may say "my power and the might of my hand" if we add, "But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God, for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth" (Deut. 8:18). As regards military might, it is not the concept of "my power and the might of my hand" which is invalid, but that the concept is not expanded to include the *source* of the power which brings success. One sometimes hears a discounting of the force of arms, of military strategy, and of military valour. Clearly we have to fight reliance on "my power and the might of my hand" wherever it appears, but we cannot let this principle weaken us and bring us to seek a way in alien directions.

Secondly: I sought the explanations of the Sages for military failure, but found not one which linked such failure to the concept of "my power and the might of my hand". If we look for sins, the Sages teach, we must look for them between man and his fellow-man. What is needed is *our* repentance, not that of our neighbour.

At the same time it must be pointed out that the purpose of suffering is not merely punishment. Suffering both refines and educates and its educational aims can be far removed indeed from those sins which brought about the misfortune. This process places a man on the path of suffering by inducing in him consciousness and perception in certain areas or directions. This course may be prolonged, or it may be short — it depends on us alone.

From that same precept of contrition comes another obligation, that of thanksgiving. "We cry bitterly and we fast", says Maimonides, "and when salvation comes, and rains fall, we sing praises to the Almighty." We must realise that, despite the sacrifices and the great pain, we have just witnessed a supremely great salvation, and we are obliged to give thanks. If we realised the extent of this deliverance we would sense its messianic base. What happened, happened — we entered this war without a premonition of danger, and therefore, except those who physically experienced the great danger themselves, we cannot feel the extent of the salva-

tion. Even though families mourn, the contrition does not put out of mind the duty of thanksgiving.

This was an "obligatory war" (*milchemet mitzvah*) from two aspects. *Zahal* (the Israel Defence Force) was marshalled against hostile armies bent on our destruction, and "it is incumbent on every Jew who is able to come to the aid of his brothers in distress and save them from pagan hands" (Maimonides). By the same token, fighting for the Land of Israel, even without the threat of annihilation, is an obligatory war, and one is no less fighting for the Holy Land when the battle is on Egyptian soil.

Any war in Israel is a war in the name of the Unity of God. The nature of the war is unaltered whether those who take part in it recognise its purpose or not. Israel by its very existence represents the divine concept of the Unity of God and of his paths of righteousness and justice. The victory of Israel, then, is the victory of the divine concept, and Israel's defeat the defeat of that concept.

"You are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and I am God" (Is. 43:12), "As you are my witnesses, O House of Israel, I am God, but when you are not my witnesses, I am not (as it were) God" (*Yalqut Shimoni* II, 455). The Sages say; "'*Tzaddik we-nosha*'" ([God] righteous and redeemed — Zech. 9:9). It is not written '*Tzaddik u-moshi'a*' (righteous and redeeming), but '*Tzaddik we-nosha*'. Rabbi Abbahu said: The redemption is yours and ours. I shall show you the salvation of God. It is not the 'salvation of Israel' that is mentioned, but the 'salvation of God'".¹

The war of the Gentiles is a war against God; but insofar as they cannot wage war against God himself, they wage war against Israel. War on the Land of Israel is war on Jerusalem. Only a war against Jewry and against Jerusalem could have united all the Arab States. Not even the most astute among the pioneers of political Zionism realised that the establishment of the State of Israel would involve war with all the Arab States. But the politicians — Jewish and Gentile alike — all forgot that the war was against Jerusalem, and war against Jerusalem is a *Jihad* (holy war). This aspect is most clearly seen in the fact that the war broke out on the holy and most sublime day, the Day of Atonement, since this was a war against Jewry, a War of the Lord.

When we talk of war, we must see things in a biblical perspective, and this recent war takes on a messianic dimension. The phenomenon of the war is itself a biblical one — throughout the two thousand years of diaspora we knew no war; much bitter travail, yes, but not war. The Bible is full of wars, but as long as *we* did not fight any, we took no notice of them. Moses in his last days, spoke to the Tribes of Israel — of what? He spoke of wars and of victory in them.

¹ *Yalqut Shimoni* II, 577.

We cannot view this war as we viewed the calamities of the days of dispersion. We must recognise the greatness of the hour in its biblical perspective, and this can be seen only in messianic terms. If, after two thousand years of dispersion, we can return and breathe in an atmosphere of the Bible, it is only in the light of the Messiah.

We must see the Yom Kippur War in a messianic dimension for three reasons:

a) The war broke out against the background of the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. "The Lord reigns; let the nations rage" (Ps. 99:1). The Sages say: As long as Israel was in exile, the nations of the world were content; but when Israel is redeemed and begins to establish its realm, the nations of the world become enraged. It is said that in the future what happened at the Exodus from Egypt will be repeated; "The nations have heard, and they tremble" (Ex. 15:14). They fear that the day of their downfall is nigh, "and I will remove the unclean spirit from the Land" (Zech. 13:2). These are their death-throes. The focus of the war is their fight for survival as Gentiles *qua* Gentiles. Evil fights for its own survival. But there is no place for Satan or the unclean spirit in the wars of the Lord. The restoration of the Kingdom of Israel as the background against which this war was fought is what gives the war its messianic dimension.

b) Even the participation in the war of all the nations of the world stems from the war's messianic dimension. Not only the Arab States took part in the war, but every nation of the world was involved: the superpowers, lesser powers, and even small countries — every oil-consuming country. The western god of technology was fighting for its very existence in the wake of the war. Talk of the brotherhood of nations and of international solidarity was shown to be empty and without foundation; the selfishness was fully exposed. All these things removed the war from a local and transitory plane to a messianic, an historical and revolutionary dimension. "The nations rage, the kingdoms totter: he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah" (Ps. 46:7-8).

c) Few people as yet recognise the extent of the salvation. There have not been many wars in Jewish history like this one: a war of the few against the many. This time each tank was opposed by a hundred — such a ratio never occurred before. If we consider that the enemy was stopped in those sectors of the north and the south in which our forces were inadequately deployed, it was clearly by command from above. If we listen to the accounts of senior officers we will understand that the proportions of the salvation in this war have a great miraculous aspect, and it is this which gives the war its messianic dimension. We were not accustomed to such things in any other period, it is not the type of salvation we ever experienced in the diaspora. Here we have the salvation about which the Prophets

preached and of which the Sages spoke. It is only because of our many transgressions that this feeling has not yet touched our hearts.

These three things, then: a war fought against the background of the rebirth of Israel, the universality of the war, the dimensions of the salvation involved — and we can add a fourth: the fact that the war broke out on the Day of Atonement — these give the Yom Kippur War its messianic dimension.

What is the function of a war in the era of redemption? Do the wars occur only before the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel, or after its establishment as well? If wars were to be expected even after the establishment of the State, the question arises whether the wars are solely for the purpose of conquering the Land, or whether they have other purposes too.

First of all, we are quite ignorant of anything connected with the era of redemption and of the Messiah, and we cannot pride ourselves on knowing details of it. "None of these things", said Maimonides, "were known until they happened. The obscure things remain with the Prophets; they were not even passed on to the Sages" (*Hilkhoh Melakhim* X, 2).

The Gemara says that war is the beginning of redemption; that is, wars themselves signal the dawn of redemption. Maimonides indicates a sign of recognition of the Messiah: "If there appears a king of the House of David, steeped in the Torah, and observant of the Law, the oral as well as the written, like David his forefather, and he compels Israel to follow and keep the Law, and he wages war in the name of the Lord — it will be considered that he is the Messiah".² So it is that after the establishment of the Kingdom of the House of David, the king will have to wage the wars of the Lord.

When will the war of Gog and Magog come? Let us recall the world of the Gaon of Vilna (R. Eliyahu) that war in our times is fragmented into small wars. "By dint of prayer, of suffering, and of all that the great men of Israel set right", said the Gaon, "the war of Gog and Magog is fragmented."

There are some things which are difficult to grasp and even more difficult to stomach. The proclamation: "In your blood — live!" (Ezek. 16: 6) is amongst those very things that the Almighty himself feels, as it were, that Israel cannot comprehend. Indeed, "... in your blood — live!" Is there a greater contradiction than that between blood-shedding and life, and is that nevertheless how it should be? The Almighty repeats his words a second time: "And when I passed by you and saw you weltering in your blood. I said unto you, 'In your own blood — live!' Yes, I said to you, 'In your blood — live!'"

² *Hilkhoh Melakhim* XI, 4.

The sources speak of wars, cruel wars following the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel. But we know that the phenomenon will be merely transient. "The last redeemer will be like the first", say the Sages. The question, "Why hast thou done evil to this people" (Ex. 5:22) was asked by the first redeemer too. "The voice of my beloved! Behold he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills. My beloved is like a roe..." (Song of Solomon 2:8-9). "My beloved is like a roe" — like the roe that appears and then is hidden, the last redeemer too appears and then is hidden."³ There are times of revealing and times of concealing. Because of the hills the roe is lost to view, but he still runs on. This we learn from the Gaon: in Israel there is no turning back in the era of the Return to Zion, from every woe will come salvation.

Why did this war happen? What was there still to conquer? After the establishment of the Kingdom of Israel, the war can have only one meaning: the refining, the purging, the purification of the people of Israel; to shock that community in order to cleanse it. Thus the great trauma; but we do not mention those hundreds and thousands who survived, who looked death in the face and witnessed miracles, and began to pray and put on *tefillin* (phylacteries). All these things together have a great place in heaven. They also have, of course, a place in the development of the Jewish people, even if the phenomenon is transient. We are talking here of processes, inner processes concerned with directions of thought and feeling, of which we have only a mere inkling. The process described by Hosea (2:7) is a long one: "And she shall follow her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them but she shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better with me than now". But when all the world becomes estranged, there comes the search for self-identity. Wherein lies our strength? We stand against the whole world! When we look into ourselves, what gives us the hope and the security that Israel will continue to exist? This necessitates internalising the search for the meaning of Jewish suffering, for an understanding of all the wars and of our destiny. From this, through the search for Jewish uniqueness will come identification with the Jewish people and the process of recognising the distinction between Israel and the nations. This is a precondition for spiritual progress.

What distinguishes Israel from other nations? How does Israel regard the individual human life? How do we treat our captives; and how, on the other hand, does the enemy talk about the sacrifice of millions? The advantage lies in the grief for each individual, and part of the adjustment that war has to produce and to inculcate is the estimation of the individual.

³ *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* I, 652, 22.

Suffering brings out the character of the Jewish people, and is both the plain and the deeper meaning of "in your blood — live; in your blood — live".

We need great faith, great confidence and strong nerves in these times. Perseverance and strength are what are demanded from our leaders. We must be encouraged in our faith and our confidence.

We are enjoined to live in the belief that since the beginning of the Return to Zion there is no going back. Things are sometimes veiled from us, but there is no regression. All the paths — paved and unpaved — lead towards the redemption of Israel. The footsteps of the Messiah approach with suffering, and sometimes by a circuitous path. We should know from the outset that, with the approach of Messiah, from every woe will come salvation, and salvation comes out of suffering. The Land of Israel is paid for by suffering, but thereby it is paid for in full.

In conclusion, the words of the Prophet: "I bring near my righteousness; it shall not be far off, and my salvation shall not tarry; and I will place salvation in Zion for Israel my glory" (Is. 46:13).

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