

ON REDEMPTION AND THE DAWN OF REDEMPTION

by

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Great is the place of Redemption — both as memory of the past and as future expectation — in the religious reality of Israel, in religious reflection, religious feeling and religious action. In bygone generations and in our own time, there have been and there are — both among pious Jews and among those who cast off the yoke of the Torah and the commandments — those who make this consciousness of redemption the mainstay of Judaism, and base Israel's faith and Torah upon it. This attitude requires further consideration. It is necessary to examine thoroughly the significance of this conception of Judaism as an empirical datum, as a living and permanent way of accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven (which is embodied in the observance of the Torah and its commandments) at all times and in all circumstances.

In the Jewish tradition the concept of Redemption is considered from two angles: 1. Redemption as a fact, i. e. the redemption that has taken place; 2. Redemption as a vision, i. e. the redemption that has still to take place. From these two angles we may learn — and we *have* to learn — something relevant to our own attitudes towards the realities of this hour.

1. The redemption that has taken place is the Exodus from Egypt, extolled in expressions descriptive of redemption in the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, the Halakhah and the Aggadah, the Prayer Book, the Passover Haggadah and the Piyyutim. Nevertheless, it would be very wrong to base one's faith in the Giver of the Torah and in his Torah upon this miraculous redemption, both in view of the testimony of the event and from a theological viewpoint.

According to the historical witness, the generation to whom the miracles occurred, and who saw the redemption with certainty, did not believe; their superficial faith, fruit of a momentary and passing experience of salvation, did not stand a single one of the tests to which they were subjected. The redeemed people failed completely, to such an extent that they caused the "first redeemer", Moses, to fail with them. If that generation was thus, what can be expected from later generations? According to Maimonides, "all miracles are certain in the opinion of one who has seen them; however, at a future time their story becomes a mere traditional narrative, and there is a possibility for the hearer to consider it untrue" (*Moreh Ha-nevukhim* III, 50).

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And if even those who had seen them did not believe, what would be their value "at a future time"? And besides that, "whosoever believes because of signs is impure of heart" (*Hilkhot Yesode Ha-Torah* VIII, 1). This is no faith at all. The Exodus from Egypt is at the same time a redemption and not a redemption: it is a redemption in view of the awakening in heaven, but it is not a redemption because of the lack of awakening on earth. Already in the great promise with regard to the Exodus from Egypt, in "the four expressions of redemption" (Ex. 6:6 f.), a deep distinction is made clear between the redemption as a means and the redemption as an end. "I will bring you out . . . I will deliver you . . . I will redeem you . . . I will take you — and you shall know that I am the Lord your God". The first actions are in the hands of God, but the last one is in the hands of man. No act of deliverance becomes a redemption unless the one who is delivered participates in the act for the sake of heaven, and there is no element of redemption in an act of deliverance when its recipient plays only a passive role therein. Redemption was not attained in the Exodus from Egypt by the people who saw in the Golden Calf their God who had brought them out from Egypt. Only many generations later, when the people of Israel took upon themselves the commitment to observe the Torah, did the Exodus from Egypt become for them a redemption.

In the order of prayers for Passover there is an archetypal symbolic intimation that the deliverance of Israel from Egypt fell short of a complete redemption. The feeling of redemption in all its depth has received in the Halakhah and tradition its appropriate verbal expression in the reading of the *Hallel* (i. e. "the Egyptian Hallel", which is the one read at the Passover *seder* service). Only on the first day of the feast commemorating the Exodus from Egypt is the Hallel read, as a remembrance of the Passover sacrifice; it is not read during the other days of the feast, not even on the seventh day, the day of deliverance on which the Mighty Hand of God revealed itself.¹ It is clear that no Hallel is read on an occasion of deliverance unless there is in it an element of redemption. And a deliverance has the quality of redemption only if Israel, when it is delivered and liberated, sees its freedom as a freedom to observe the Torah. Therefore not only on Purim but also on most of the days of Passover the Hallel is not recited, because the end of those who were brought out of Egypt testifies to their beginning: their hearts were not dedicated to act for the sake of heaven when they went out from slavery to freedom. In contrast to this, the Sages saw fit to have the Hallel recited on all eight days of Channuka, for then Israel experienced miracles, salvation and deliverance in a war for the sake of the Torah and of heaven.

¹ The "half" Hallel, which is read during these days, is not a commandment but only a usage (Maimonides, *Hilkhot Channuka* 83, 7).

2. The vision of redemption is the main object of the prophecies of consolation in the book of Isaiah and is also reflected in the words of the prophets of wrath and destruction, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This vision is sometimes related to the Return to Zion after the Babylonian Exile, but the great promises of that vision were not realised here, and the event of the Return to Zion never became established in the mind of the nation as a redemption. (Crescas and Abarbanel even went so far as to see the bondage and exile extending without a break from the destruction of the first Temple to the present time, because in their opinion during the period of the second Temple we were in exile in our own land.) Therefore, these prophecies were already at an early period interpreted as pointing to an unknown future, and thus became "a messianic vision", to which certain prophecies of redemption were possibly already referring from the beginning. This final messianic redemption — what is its meaning? There are two views possible with regard to this great question:

a. The messianic redemption is to be seen as a fact, in the same way that the first redemption (from Egypt) was a fact, with the difference that the latter was in the past while the former will be in the future; in this sense the prophecies of redemption fall under the definition of giving information of what will be, and are similar to the oracles of foreign nations.

b. The messianic redemption means a direction and a target one has to strive towards, and the attainment of which is a task laid upon man; one should understand in this sense the words of the *Tosafot* (*Yebamot* 49, a): "No prophets prophesy anything else than what *ought to be*".

According to the first view, the redemption is a separate article of faith, which stands on its own, without any link to the world of the Torah and the commandments which are valid in the unredeemed world, while the redemption is seen as an alternative to the world of the commandments. According to the second view, the redemption is the idea which guides and stimulates service of God through observance of the Torah and the commandments, an idea which makes the commandments an everlasting task and duty; the redemption is seen as a reality, but one which always transcends the existing and which one never reaches but must always strive to reach. The first conception necessarily creates a tension between the world of the halakhah and messianic faith, and insofar as the messianic redemption becomes the principal matter in religion the acceptance of the yoke of the Torah and the commandments becomes subordinate to that. This is what the eminent pillar of the halakhah, Maimonides, was aware of when he cautioned in the last chapter of the *Mishneh Torah* which is devoted to the vision of messianic redemption: "No-one should ever occupy himself with the legendary themes or spend much time on midrashic statements bearing on this and like subjects, since they lead neither to the fear of God nor to the love of him" (*Mishneh Torah*, XIV, 12:2).

From the tension between, on the one hand, "fear and love" (which is the same as the service of God in the observance of the Torah and the commandments) and, on the other hand, the "messianic vision", arose Christianity and later Sabbateanism, both of which abolished the commandments. According to the second view, the Messiah is the one whom I await every day and who *will* come, whereas the Messiah who *has* come is in fact always a false Messiah.

"The four expressions of redemption" when not accompanied by the consummation "and you shall know that I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 6:6f) represent a false redemption and a false redemption is harder for the people of Israel than the loss of faith in redemption. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple by Titus, and even Hadrian's decrees outlawing the Torah and the commandments, did not uproot Judaism, not even from the hearts of those who despaired of redemption and expected that the seed of Abraham would perish by itself (b *Baba Batra* 60 b), whereas the Sabbatean upheaval shattered the Judaism of those who believed in Shabbetai Tzevi and opened the door to its undermining among the whole Jewish people. Therefore man — who has no communication with what is behind the veil of heaven — must exercise the utmost caution before proclaiming events of military deliverance and national-political success to be of the nature of *atchalta de-ge'ulah* (dawn of redemption) or "the beginning of the growing of our redemption". There is no hope for a Jewish religion which bestows a messianic halo on a king who "did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat which he made Israel to sin" — by virtue of his being the one who "restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the sea of the Arabah" (2 Kings 14:23-25). It is religious blindness not to distinguish between a liberation of the Temple mountain by Hasmonean Jews and its liberation by Hellenistic Jews. One must be apprehensive of a religious-spiritual collapse among the remnants of the faithful of Israel in the wake of this modern Sabbateanism.

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