

SUMMARY:

THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF THE RETURN TO ZION

by

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Jewish history is a chain of dispersions and returns. The stream of immigration from the Soviet Union, the crisis of Jewish emancipation in the United States, and the expansion of Israel to include additional Israelite lands, all at the same time, suggest – or perhaps testify – that the modern return to Zion is entering its decisive stage. What are its character and its possibilities, its dangers and tests?

The expected event called “redemption”, or “days of the Messiah”, in Jewish thought means the termination of oppression by foreign nations and ingathering of the exiles, not a change of the present world order or signs of the world to come. Where does this *historical* process of a general return, called “redemption”, have its inception? In which reality is it rooted? By what causes has it been propelled? And in what ways does it differ from former processes of return?

It has its inception in the far-reaching scattering, the dispersion, which sustains the continuing existence of the Diaspora. The process of ingathering of exiles is accompanied by a reduction in places of dispersion. At the end of the twentieth century the Diaspora is centred in relatively few great Jewish concentrations. Many centres of dispersion have been wiped out before our eyes; how the others will end depends on the dispersed themselves, on their response to the choice which has now been given them: “And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered, for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord has said, and in the remnant whom the Lord shall call” (Joel 2:32). The extent of deliverance depends on recognition by the exiles of what is in store for them. But no matter how many they may be, they are remnants.

For the period of the ingathering is fraught with a worsening endemic crisis, dangers and horrors, both in the general human background and in the Jewish dimension as well. Many are the descriptions of “a war of Gog and Magog”, “trials and tribulations of the Messiah”, and of global

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tension at the time of the complete Return. They are reiterated by every generation in its own particular style and imagery, from the Bible and the Midrash to the present day. The trials and tribulations are a legitimate, inextricable part of the Return.

The expected Return is characterised not only by the attendant horrors but by the difference between it and previous returns: this time it is a full return to Zion, an all-embracing ingathering of exiles, the ending of the Exile. But with the promise comes a warning: the deliverance from the exiled state and the Return are given as an opportunity; its fulfilment depends on the remnant. If its will is not at one with the Return, then the challenges facing it cannot be overcome.

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The Jews gathered together in their land are stronger socially, economically, and technically than they had ever been. At one and the same time have ripened the maximum motivation for their return and the maximum qualifications for the fulfilment of it.

The greatest obstacle to the return lies in the land of return. Phenomena of demoralisation and decadence, which flood her from the West, are liable to become a greater danger than any political-military pressure. The Jews absorb destructive influences at least as quickly as positive ones. It all depends on their selective talents. There are times when there is urgent need of restrictions – for example the late Roman-Hellenistic period, with the fascinating decline of a great civilisation and the seductions of its permissiveness. The Mishnah was the Jewish reaction; it was by the merit of the sages and their reservations that the nation could continue to exist. We have something similar in our time. And the difference is not unequivocal: on the one hand the nation is going through a period of revival and ingathering of exiles, and not through destruction and dispersion; on the other hand, the measure of assimilation is much greater and deeper than in the first centuries after the destruction of the Temple. The gap with tradition is growing; in some areas there is a complete break.

How does one mend the breach and pick up the pieces to build them up again into an effective structure in as many aspects of life as possible? How does one apply the criteria of the Jewish tradition to the new material and spiritual reality? What should one choose from the surrounding bounty that will not turn against us? We must be conscious of the character of our period and the persistence of our tradition at one and the same time. In the earliest period of the "oral" tradition, there was a well defined and exclusive source of guidance and direction – the Tanakh; now, two thousand years of creativeness and trial have been added. We cannot be strict followers of the splendid orthodox eighteenth-century Judaism from before the emancipation and the alienation. The whole breadth of Jewish life of four

thousand years is the source we lean on. The returnees for Zion have to look for sources and points in various periods to which to relate for different aspects of life; the whole of Jewish history is a challenge and confrontation for them. The oral law was crystallised at a time when the Jews were without their land; now it needs additions and development.

The post-industrial civilisation is very different from those that preceded it, and which the sages of the Talmud faced. Is it purely accidental that such a time, when man's equilibrium is shaken, produced the complete return to Zion? The generations-of-return are obliged to apply the Jewish way of life *to their circumstances*; daring in selection, interpretation and application is not a licence-of-convenience but a yoke-of-obligation: the audacity of the answer is historically and essentially blended with the audacity of the return.

The full return to Zion is a religious turning-point: what is holy must become renewed, what is new has to be purified. The struggle within Israeli Judaism over its character is ultimately more important than any other process going on; the outcome of this struggle will be decisive for Israel's political and physical fate. Its military fitness is an aspect of its mental fitness. The spiritual fight is pitched against powerful external forces. Israel can take its stand by drawing on the treasures of its past and reviving them: that is a great and mighty army. While the struggle for its special character is being waged, there is hope for returned Jewry.

But is this great and mighty army being used? The modern return-to-Zion was mainly realised by non-traditional Jews and the result of this is now evident in all its seriousness and places a question-mark on the return. The greater part of the population and its educational system identify themselves with Western culture, and not necessarily with the most balanced part of it. Many view the Jewish way of life through the eyes of that culture; they think in non-Jewish concepts, using non-Jewish semantics in expression. The problem is aggravated by the fact that for educated Israelis, and even more for non-educated ones, post-biblical thought and literature are a closed book. The best parts of this huge literature need to be re-edited and explained so that it will be opened to the men and women of the Return in all its power and beauty. There is no chance of transmitting this spiritual world – and *it* is the world of Judaism – to the young generation as a secondary subject. It ought to be the mainstay of education in Israel; one cannot properly study the Bible without it.

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The Land of Israel is a main factor in the struggle for identity of the returnees, insofar as they recognise its uniqueness and are conscious of the special relation between this people and its land. The Land of Israel is not a "fatherland" for the Jews in the accepted sense of the word: in

some sense it is less and in another sense immeasurably more. It is less, for the Jewish people was absent from it for about half the time of its existence. The relationship is full of ambivalence; it is the designated land of the Jewish people, but they tried sometimes to evade her as they tried to evade their fate. On the other hand, when the Jews were far away from their land, its image in their consciousness became more and more pervasive until the love for Zion became the *leitmotif* of their lives. The land got its image from the power of their love and from the knowledge flowing from this love. The land of Israel is more than a framework for Jewish existence, it is a part of its essence; it is not just a "territory", but "lovely for the Jews and they are lovely to it". It is a small country, yet a "whole world". It has everything: snow-covered heights and the rift cutting down to the heart of the earth, stony mountains and ample valleys between them, height and coastal plain with all their changing aspects, fruitful deserts and variegated seas. The land is a totality, and the part smacks of the whole, but the *quality* of its totality depends on the Jewish people. Just as the Jews are not complete without the country, so it is defective without their presence. When the Jews return to their land they not only aspire to its territorial completeness, but to the perfection of nature as well, with the flora and fauna as they were of old. The Israel Authority of Nature Reserves explores the farthest corners of the globe in order to bring back to the land eagles and deer that used to live here in the time of the Bible and disappeared while the Jews were absent from their land. Without them the land would be wanting. When the Jews do not live in their land then it tends to be a wasteland. And the function of the non-Jewish inhabitants is "to be the guardians of the place until the time you will come". (Sifra, Kedoshim).

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The ecological conception of the modern returnees is anchored in Jewish concepts at once challenging the post-industrial period and overtaking it. By clinging to the land of Israel they renew their identity. The authenticity of the Return is put to the test by whether it displays the uniqueness of Israel's civilisation and is effectively facing the period's challenges: continuity and efficiency; differentiation from the West and withstanding its ailments which are lethal for Israel; mastering of modern technique but reservation about its by-products. In other words, the Return ought to be steeped in *teshuvah*, repentance. Judaism is an ever-present revelation. It is conscious of limitations inherent in the human creation, and its basic commandments are valid at all times. Judaism is outside of time, not of time, and challenging the times.

The eternal meaning of the Jewish orientation finds its expression in the Jewish year with its festivals, fasts and Sabbaths. Ostensibly they are in memory of events which occurred in the past; however, everything seems

to happen toward the same end, simultaneously, independent of any passing cause. Modernist Western conceptions try to understand the present through a "shaking off" of the past; Judaism sees the present as a concentrated past; the present is only a dim reflection of eternity, interpreted in the light of the past. The Jewish calendar is a procession of traffic signs, directing the spirit of man in every age. The most important among them is the Sabbath, recurring every seven days. "If you will live to keep the Sabbath, then you will be saved from the day of Gog and Magog, from the tribulations of the Messiah, and from the Last Judgment" (*Mekhilta*).

The society of the returned is tested by its ability to live the Jewish calendar, its understanding of the Sabbath and imposing it on actual life. The Sabbath is not a social institution, its main point is not abstinence from work. Rest is there in order to make way for a different kind of active life, different in substance – between man and himself, between man and his fellow-men, between man and the universe and between man and God. The restrictions of the Sabbath are a frame to a picture, to guide the eye.

Even orthodox Jews sometimes felt that the Sabbath was first of all a day of rest and the liberal Jews boasted of it as "a social achievement" parallel to the Sunday but preceding it. However, the weekly rest day in the modern technological society has become a more profane regular day with "entertainment" paramount. The equilibrium of technological man is not achieved by entertainment, but by fundamentally breaking the whole profane cycle; an ever-returning breaking-up, independent of the process of the cycle, which brings man back to himself and his surroundings, to his inner springs and basic relationships, to a slower rhythm and a listening attitude, to humility and openness. The Jews in their land now need the Sabbath more than at any time in their dispersion and in their past. Otherwise they will be shattered by their material and technical achievements, the more these grow. If there ever was a period which needed the Sabbath – this is it.

The sources of the Sabbath are cosmic, as are those of the Jewish holidays. The Sabbath was revealed to the Jews as part of a universal balance – the *land* rested in the *Shemittah*. The social commandments connected with the Sabbath are part of her superhuman status: "God the Creator "rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made", God's rest includes his Creation, nature and all that is in it. The day of rest for the land is of the same value as the day of rest for the Jews. The Sabbath is a union with God and a reconciliation with Creation and therefore transfused with pleasure.

The renewal of the Sabbath is not an easy matter, neither for the orthodox, nor for the secular section of the population. The former have sometimes stuck so fast to the restrictions and prohibitions of the Sabbath that they have lost sight of its heart; the latter find the prohibitions an obstacle in the way to its heart.

The return-to-Zion is at its peak. All is yet in the balance. The security of Israel depends on her spiritual powers, on the measure of turning to tradition. The greatest danger is not in Arab aggression; it is in the destructive influences from Western civilisation, which is itself at a point of deep confusion. The danger is not in the strength of the West, but in its weaknesses; they are liable to undermine Israeli society from within, and ruin its external fortifications.

The question is not one of choice between Jewish or Western-style existence. Israel's society and state will be unable to exist if there does not grow within them a continuation of Jewish civilisation which will determine their character and fate. Without it, Israeli society will break down, and the State will fall from external pressure. There is no chance of return to the land without a return to the Jewish heritage. And the opinion is not between statehood and renewed dispersion, but between sovereignty and destruction. The second destruction may be more horrible than the European holocaust. The Israeli community faces the choice; it has moral autonomy, awful and sublime. "Everything is in the hand of God, except the fear of God."

Summary by Chanah Arnon

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