

RABBI YEHOShUA PFEFFER

Israel Is a Miracle



THE STATE OF ISRAEL is a miracle.

To appreciate this simple fact, one need only glance at the polemical texts rallying against Zionism in the early years of the 20th century. As part of a broader claim that Zionism intended to turn its followers against religion, one

1902 rabbinic manifesto included the observation that “the deceivers know full well that settling tens of thousands of Jews in the Land of Israel among the other nations dwelling therein, the more so establishing a state of the Jews and a safe haven with the permission of the nations, is entirely preposterous.”

After 1,900 years of harsh exile during which the Jews lacked any semblance of national sovereignty and self-determination, this rabbinic statement was a fair representation of the national Jewish mood. Yet by 1917, just 20 years after Zionism was founded, the most powerful government in the world had issued the Balfour Declara-

tion, declaring its support for the establishment in Palestine of a “national home for the Jewish people.” An entry in Herzl’s diary for September 1897 reads: “Were I to sum up the Basel Congress in a word...it would be this: At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years perhaps, and certainly in 50 years, everyone will perceive it.” Fifty years almost to the month, Herzl’s prophecy was fulfilled in the UN vote to endorse the Partition Plan in November 1947.



The State of Israel is justifiably perceived as a wonder of the modern world. Which other ancient people survived a millennia-long exile and ultimately returned as a sovereign state to its ancestral homeland? Derek Prince, an influential Christian Zionist who witnessed the event, described what he saw in near-eschatological terms: “On a single day—the fourteenth of May, 1948—Israel was born as a complete nation, with a government, an army, and a fully functional administration....To the best of my knowledge, it was an unprecedented event in human history.” The story is of course more outstanding yet. The defeat of five Arab armies against all odds in Israel’s War of Independence, the continued military success in fending off sworn enemies, the economic and demographic flourishing of a fledgling state ostensibly preoccupied with mere survival—all of these make Israel exceptional and remarkable.

Even the Haredim, Israel’s large and growing ultra-Orthodox population whose relationship with the state is ambivalent, quickly overcame their initial suspicions and recognized the miracle unfolding before their eyes. Rabbi Shalom Noach Berezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, could not contain his amazement:

The wondrous phenomenon of our generation [is such that] our very eyes behold revelations that no dreamer or visionary could have entertained just a generation ago. Suddenly, a remarkable generation arose.... Tents of Torah study bloom, Hasidic sanctuaries flourish in the fullness of their glory, alongside a Teshuva movement unheard of in any past generation. The question begs itself: Who bore us all of these?

Of course, the miracle of Jewish revival goes far beyond the world of Orthodoxy. The very fact that nonobservant Jews remain Jewish, coupled with birth rates that exceed any other OECD country, testifies to the wonder of Israel no less than its yeshiva institutions and Hasidic courts.

But miracles can dissipate as quickly as they occur. The miracles of the Egyptian redemption did not prevent the death of the entire generation in the wilderness on account of its sinfulness. The miracle wrought by Elijah at Carmel did not prevent the religious and political disintegration of the people. It is up to us to ensure that the miracle of modern-day Israel does not suffer the same fate.

The Hebrew word for miracle, *nes*, has three additional and closely related meanings. It means a standard or banner (Numbers 21:8); raising or elevating (Rashi on Exodus 20:17); and a trial (Genesis 22:1). Miracles raise a banner whose purpose is to teach us a lesson. They try us, and they elevate us. So does Israel.

The State of Israel is a tall Jewish standard. Coming against the horrific darkness of the Shoah, it is a brilliant ray of light that heralded the almost unthinkable return of the Jews to history. Born out of the ashes, it gives the lie both to traditional Christian claims of supersessionism (a point Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe often emphasized) and to the Nietzschean “death of God.”

Beyond a banner, however, it is a call and a trial. We did not return

to our ancestral homeland for the purpose of mere survival. This dramatic return challenges us to take history into our hands, partnering with God as we mold it in our image. That is what the early Zionist leaders who established the State of Israel and wrought the miracle did — despite all their ideological differences. Today, it is our turn — the turn of a population much changed over the course of 75 years — to move Israel into its next phase.



In advance of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, God sent Moshe to inform the Israelites of the purpose of the entire affair: “You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5).

On the one hand, the high priest serves God alone in the holy Temple. The Jews also serve alone: “a nation that will dwell in solitude and not be reckoned among the nations” (Numbers 23:9). On the other hand, the priest also has an educational function: “They shall teach your statutes to Jacob and your Torah to Israel” (Deuteronomy 33:10). Likewise, the Jewish nation’s role is to spread to the rest of the world the *Derech Hashem*, the “way of God” first discovered by Abraham (Genesis 18:19).

For many years, the Jewish nation was forced to focus on the first priestly function: an internal and private service of God. The need to endure barely allowed us to contemplate anything beyond survival. Seventy-five years into statehood (the *gematria*, or numerical value, of *kohen*, the word for priest), we need to consider how the Jewish state can realize its fuller mission. Jews are not used to thinking this way. While we are physically free of our exile among the nations, it seems that the process of releasing Jews from their exilic state of mind has a long way to run. It is a debt that the miracle of Israel is due.

Over the past several years, Israeli society has internalized a

“tribes” model, which espouses a multicultural vision emphasizing the differences among various groups that make up Israel’s citizenry. According to this thinking, the real necessity is to ensure economic prosperity for all groups. The Arab rioting of 2021 and the recent escalation of tensions among Israel’s “tribes”—to the point of our social fabric coming apart—indicate that this lowest-common-denominator approach isn’t good enough.

Perpetuating the miracle of Israel requires us to unify under the distinctive banner of a Jewish state, emblazoned with the moral monotheism that Israel must manifest—the “way of God” that includes kindness, righteousness, and justice (Jeremiah 9:23). There are strong differences of opinion concerning the character of a Jewish state and the specific arrangements it ought to espouse. Even so, a shared belief in the vision, coupled with the deep responsibility and brave leadership required to bridge the gaps between Left and Right, secular and religious, will ensure the achievement of an elusive unity.

In a sense, that would be Israel’s biggest miracle of all. *

RABBI YEHOShUA PFEFFER is the founding editor of *Tzarich Iyun*, a Haredi journal of thought and ideas around which he operates a variety of educational programs. He is a community rabbi in Ramot, Jerusalem, and teaches on the law faculty of The Hebrew University.