

Va'etchanan

August 20, 2016

Is Israel just another country? Or is Israel obligated to be a light unto the nations?

וְשִׁמְרֵתֶם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם כִּי הוּא חֻמְתְּכֶם וּבִינְתְּכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן אֶת כָּל־הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ
רַק עַם־חָכָם וְנָבוֹן הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה:

Deut 4:6 *Observe them and do them [the laws and rules] so that in the eyes of other nations you'll have wisdom and judiciousness, and on hearing all these laws people will say, "surely, that is a great nation, wise and judicious."*



Rav Kook (1865–1935) served as the first chief rabbi of Palestine during the British Mandate. Born in the Russian Empire, he came to *Eretz Yisrael* in 1904 to serve Ashkenazi agricultural communities around Jaffa. Kook's main work, *Eyn Ayah*, is a commentary on two Talmudic tractates, *Berakhot* and *Shabbat*. The themes on which he focuses revolve around morality and spirituality. About *parashat Ve'etchanan* Kook writes:

There are times and situations in which the Jewish people must be a "people who dwells alone" a people separated from all other nations in order to safeguard their special heritage. On the other hand, the Jewish people is also charged to influence and uplift the rest of humanity, to be (as written in Isaiah 42:6) "a light unto the nations. (Ein Ayah Vol. I)

Can a country populated with diverse immigrants; a democracy encompassing a broad array of political parties with different ideals for how to govern; a nation facing very real security concerns, ever succeed as a "light unto the nations?" And, if so, what might that "light" look like? Is it fair to expect of Israel, now having once again established nationhood, to reflect a three-thousand-year-old story and commit to standing unique among the nations of the world?

Some people believe that, by virtue of the very existence of so many institutions (both government and nongovernment), working against social injustices, Israel shines as an example of a nation committed to justice striving to act within a high moral standard. Consider the agencies and committees within the government that seeks to ensure equitable standards of living. Consider the innumerable NGOs that, irrespective of one's political allegiances, are able to voice open criticism about where Israel falls short of being a "light unto the nations."

But, even then, Israel as a nation and Israelis themselves can fall short of righteous ideals. The "real" Israel, even as our world's only Jewish and democratic state, is complex. When encountering challenges from within the country and surrounding nations, despite having the best of intentions, Israel must frequently move forward with the best approach in untenable situations. Further, as a democratic nation, Israelis can and do hold a variety of views and opinions of how best to handle these challenges. But then again, don't most who live in democratic settings? Often the ideal moral position is compromised by pragmatic necessity. Don't many of us do this every day in our lives?

Jewish people the world over hold a special place in their hearts for Israel. Liturgical and biblical texts, as well as stories about Israel's 19th and 20th century pioneers, have served to paint a utopian picture of a Promised Land. Since Israel's establishment in 1948, for many, particularly those who have limited exposure to Israel on the ground, there is a strong reliance on media and political pundits to continue shaping that image. This has created a huge clash of "Israel: the legend" and "Israel: in reality." To view Israel as a country positioned at either end of a behavioral spectrum oversimplifies the authenticity of real people with real accomplishments, real challenges, and genuine commitments to govern themselves as an enduring democratic nation.

There are those who consider exposing difficult and unjust conditions or policies treasonous. Israel combats enough dissenters and it's not necessary to encourage criticism, in the absence of holding a deep commitment to the state of the Jewish people. Yet, it is precisely because Israel is willing and able to expose and grapple with challenging moral choices that it will continue grow stronger.

So, with a system of government that allows and even encourages change and progress, alongside a citizenry that cares deeply about justice, Israel chooses not to be mired in hopelessness even in dire times. Rather, from the foundations of Israel's commitments and ideals, individuals and groups continue to work to improve the country. As the national anthem states, no matter what the challenges: *Od lo avda tikvateinu* - Our hope is not yet – nor will it ever be - lost.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is Rav Kook's statement a fair one for a people and a modern nation, irrespective of their religious background?
2. To what extent should Israel consider the world's opinion as it develops as a nation?
3. With Israel's founding in the aftermath of the Holocaust, might people believe that the country and its citizens feel a sense of impunity? Or with a passion for self-determination, is Israel's behavior at times defiant? Are there other democratic countries that preserve at all costs their right to choose and their independence in decision-making?
4. To what extent should Israel's government rely upon NGOs to ensure equitable and just conditions for all Israeli citizens? Is it possible that NGOs can become so pervasive that they cause dependency by the very populations that they seek to serve?

Additional References:

[NGO Monitor](#)

[Association for Civil Rights in Israel](#)

[Center for World Religions, Citizen Diplomacy, and Conflict Resolution](#)

[Hiddush Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook: Teachings in English](#)

[Israel Democracy Institute](#)