

Ki Tavo September 9, 2017

הַקָּטָן יִהְיֶה לְאַלְפֵי, וְהַצָּעִיר לְגוֹי עֲצוּם; אֲנִי יְהוָה, בְּעֵתָהּ אֶחְיִשְׁנָהּ

Isaiah 60:22 *The smallest shall become a thousand, and the least a mighty nation; I Adonai will hasten it in its time.*



The *Haftarah* of this week (the assigned reading from the Book of Prophets) comes from a section of Deutero-Isaiah, the second half of the prophetic book. This text addresses the Israelite experience in Babylonian exile. These encouraging verses that promise the return to the Land of Israel are one of a series of seven readings of consolation following *Tisha B'Av*, the commemoration of the many catastrophic episodes in the history of the Jewish people.

The ambiguity of this final verse, Isaiah 60:22, has resulted in two diametrically opposed theological views as to what will eventually redeem the Jewish people. One view claims that human merit will speed G-d's hand in bringing about redemption and return to Israel. The other states that Divine mystery surrounds the redemptive return to Israel and, as such, no human effort will speed or inhibit it.

Early Zionists quickly rejected the notion of “waiting” for Divine intervention. They were intent to make the return to Israel a human effort. Theodore Herzl, in a letter published in the *London Jewish Chronicle*, January 17, 1896, wrote, “I am introducing no new idea; on the contrary, it is a very old one. It is a universal idea—and therein lies its power—old as the people, which never, even in the time of bitterest calamity, ceased to cherish it. This is the restoration of the Jewish State.” Herzl's contemporaries with similar views added their voice to the need for action, not passivity, in reestablishing the Jewish homeland.

Yet, as the idea of state building slowly gained momentum in the late 1800s, not all Jewish leaders outside or within the borders of Israel shared this outlook. In their “Protest Against Zionism,” published in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, June 11, 1897, two liberal Rabbis, Sigmund Maybaum and Heinemann Vogelstein, vehemently opposed the efforts of Herzl and spoke out against attending the First

Zionist Congress. After a lengthy preamble, they wrote, “The efforts of so-called Zionists to create a Jewish National State in Palestine are antagonistic to the messianic promises of Judaism, as contained in Holy Writ and in later religious sources.” They maintained that assimilation and emancipation in their own countries remained vital to the survival of the Jewish people. Returning to the State of Israel and leaving the Diaspora communities rejected true modernity and represented a major step backward.

From another line of religious interpretation, Rabbi Zadok HaCohen Rabinowitz, a Polish thinker and *chassidic* leader, wrote in his Open Letter c. 1900 that, “With faith in the Lord, my soul trusts in His word that the day of redemption will come. I stand in expectation of the coming of the messiah. [But before his advent] should three hundred scourges of iron afflict me, I will not budge from my place. I will not go up there [to Jerusalem] and join my name to those of the Zionists.” While the objective of Rabinowitz’s argument was the same as that of Maybaum and Vogelstein - rejection of Zionism - the crux lay somewhere else entirely. He argued against Zionism because he believed it contradicted the coming of the Messiah as the catalyst for a reborn Israel while Maybaum and Vogelstein insisted that Zionism undermined the long-term survival of Jews in the world, which depended on assimilation in the Diaspora.

We know how it ends. The Zionists realized their dream for a Jewish state; the modern State of Israel declared independence in 1948. In the end, the people did, in fact, “hasten” the return to the Land of Israel; not necessarily to embrace religious aspirations, rather in a determined effort to forge their own destiny through Jewish self-determination. While many forceful minds sought the physical Jewish return to the Land of Israel, there were often just as many, if not more, Jews who vigorously opposed accepting a new homeland, perfectly content to remain in their homes, states, and nations of residence.

Discussion Questions:

Why do you think liberal rabbis opposed Zionist aspirations using messianic promise and scripture as their reasoning? Focus on the word ‘liberal’ to get the discussion started!

How does the State of Israel reflect the idea that individuals should work toward a messianic age and take matters into their own hands? What about those who believe Jews are meant to wait for the unfolding of G-d’s plan? Are the beliefs in Jewish nationhood and spiritual Zionism mutually exclusive?

Additional Resources:

Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, Jewish in the Modern World, Oxford University Press, 1995.

“[Zionism](#),” The Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume XII, 1906.