

With Us in Our Impurity

Yom Ha'atzmaut 5779

This coming week, Jews around the world will mark Yom Ha'Atzmaut. To be sure, Yom Ha'Atzmaut is a triumphant day, celebrating the Divinely orchestrated return of the Jewish people to their ancestral home, the survival of a young state surrounded by implacably hostile neighbors, and the remarkable renaissance of entire areas of Jewish spirituality since the reestablishment of a national homeland. At the same time, it also may also be experienced as a day of intense introspection, as we have occasion to take stock of the physical and spiritual welfare of our seventy one year old state.

Leaving aside those unrepentant enemies of the Jewish people from around the Middle East who continue to dream of the destruction of the State, we are also challenged from within, by those who cast doubt on the State's legitimacy. On one end of the spectrum, there are those for whom the State is a complete and irredeemable failure because it is not sufficiently religious. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those for whom the State is an unjustifiable colonialist enterprise that hardly deserves the right of self-defense. How are those of us who remain steadfast in our conviction that the State of Israel is a clear expression of the God of Israel's ongoing and unbreakable relationship with His people, the very sound of our Beloved knocking on the door of history, to paraphrase the Rav's celebrated essay *Kol Dodi Dofek*, to respond to these challenges?

In the opening chapter of this week's sedra, Acharei Mot, the Torah tells us about a truly remarkable procedure which the Kohen Gadol performed every year on the Day of Atonement. While he was offering sacrifices on his own behalf, on behalf of his family, and on behalf of the Jewish people, the Torah tells us the Kohen would also have to perform atonement on behalf of the Temple itself.

וְכַפֵּר עַל הַקֹּדֶשׁ מִטְמְאוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִפְשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטָּאתָם וְכֵן יַעֲשֶׂה לְאַהֲל מוֹעֵד
הַשֹּׁכֵן אִתְּם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאוֹתָם

"And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleannesses of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, even all their sins; and so shall he do for the tent of meeting, **that dwelleth with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.**"

The Talmud explains that this procedure was meant to purify the Temple, as it may have been contaminated over the course of the year by individuals coming into the Temple, either inadvertently or deliberately, while they were ritually impure, thereby bringing impurity to the Temple. (Shavuos 12b)

What is striking regarding this procedure is the very fact that it is necessary. Why would Hashem allow his pristine, unadulterated Temple to be contaminated by often impure man? The answer is dramatically recorded in the Torah: Hashem desires to be **הַשֹּׁכֵן אִתְּם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאוֹתָם**, to dwell with us even when we are impure. On a perpetual basis, Hashem chooses impure closeness with the Jewish people rather than antiseptic distance. In the language of Chazal, Hashem accepts the fact that

'the Torah was not given to the ministering angels,' that human beings are flawed, and gives us an opportunity, every single year on Yom Kippur, to cleanse the contamination that we have brought into the Temple.

The Talmud (Yoma 57a) records a story in which a heretic verbally assaulted one of the Sages, R. Chanina, arguing that the Jewish people were in a state of total impurity. R. Chanina responded, not by denying the charge, but by simply pointing to this verse, and stating emphatically that God does not desert His people just because they are not in a state of complete purity, that they have not yet scaled the loftiest heights of spiritual life.

The analogy for us, the Modern Orthodox community for whom an unapologetic Zionism is a hallmark of our religious outlook, is unmistakably clear. We need not bury our head in the sand and ignore the many legitimate critiques of the state. Who amongst us doesn't wish that the Israeli educational system was imparting at least a modicum of Jewish knowledge and identity to its secular students? Who amongst us doesn't cringe when we read of allegations of pervasive corruption at the highest levels of government?

Yet, we can be reassured that acknowledgment of these shortcomings is in no way a rejection of Hashem's ongoing involvement with the State. On the contrary, we can take comfort in our recognition that Hashem is truly **הַשֵּׁכֵן אִתָּם בְּתוֹךְ טְמֵאָתָם**, that He continues to be intimately involved with the State of Israel, even when it is imperfect.

We look forward to Israel's 72nd year of existence with the abiding faith that, just as Hashem afforded the Jewish people an annual opportunity to purify the Temple which they had contaminated, Hashem will grant us the strength, conviction and wisdom to cleanse our holy and precious Land of the impurity which we may have brought to it, and to be active participants in the miracle that continues to unfold in front of our very eyes.