

# Eretz Yisrael: The Passion of Our Time

By Rabbi Sholom Gold

There was something hauntingly familiar about the question posed in a recent issue of Viewpoint, "Why are serious Jews like us living in America?" It seemed like an echo from the distant past – and then it came rushing back. The question had indeed been asked before. It's right there in the Kuzari, Rabbi Yehuda Halevy's classic masterpiece of Jewish faith.

**T**he Rabbi (chaver) in response to the query by the King of the Khazars, "Tell me some of the words that they (the Rabbis of the Talmud) said regarding Eretz Yisroel". The chaver responds with a long list of Talmudic statements about Eretz Yisroel such as, "It is always better for one to live in Israel, even in a city that is mostly non-Jewish – than to live outside Israel – even in a city that is mostly Jewish. For anyone who dwells in Israel is like someone who has a G-d and anyone who dwells outside of Israel is like someone who has no G-d" .... The Rabbi praised "one who comes to live in Eretz Yisroel during his lifetime rather than one who is transported there after his death ... the air of Israel makes one wise ... anyone who walks four cubits is guaranteed a place in the world to come."

The King responds with a variation on the theme of why is a serious Rabbi like you not living in Israel? The Kuzari

says: "If so, then you must have limited affection for your Torah. You have not made Israel your goal, nor your place of living and dying. Yet you say in your prayers: Have mercy on Zion for it is our life's home. I see that all your knee bending and bowing toward Israel is mere flattery or insincere custom. ..." One could add the twice yearly L'shana Habaah BiYerushalayim at the end of Yom Kippur and the Seder night. What about Birkat Hamazon, especially the second blessing where we thank G-d for having "granted as a heritage to our ancestors, a desirable, good, and wide land."

How does one who has decided not to go on aliyah say all that and so much more? Major portions of our prayers focus on Eretz Yisroel and are known to all. I would add a prayer that is unfortunately overlooked. There is an amazing sentence in the Tachnun prayer we say on Mondays and Thursdays. Its significance casts a light on all of our prayers and confirms that HaShem does listen to us and answer our fervent requests. This prayer is one that defines the

generation in which we live. For some strange reason I feel that we are hardly aware of the power of this prayer. But it's there, tucked away in the folds of the long Tachnun. "Our Father, compassionate Father, show us a sign for good, אֱתָ לְטוֹבָה and gather our scattered ones from the four corners of the earth. Let all nations recognize and know that You are the L-rd our G-d."

Of all things, the most important sign for good, we ask for is the ingathering of the exiles and we are the generation that in fact bears most eloquent testimony that He heard our prayers and He answered them.

So the King has challenged the chaver. He has asked the Viewpoint question!

I have always been deeply moved by the honesty and palpable pain of Rabbi Yehuda Halevy's answer: "You have shamed me King of Khazar. It is this very sin that prevented us from achieving that which G-d promised us for the Second Temple, as it says, "Rejoice and be happy daughter of Zion, [for I am coming and will dwell in your

midst, says G-d." This means that the Divinity was prepared to settle [in the Second Temple] as it had previously [in the First Temple], provided that the Jewish people would all agree to return to Israel eagerly. Instead, only some returned, while the majority – including the important leaders – remained in Babylon. They preferred subservience in the Diaspora, so that they would not

have to part from their homes and affairs."

In the 2010 version of the answer, there is a total absence of hope, yearning, longing, anticipation, resolve and prayer. All the elements that make up the spiritual, emotional and religious holy baggage of the 2,000 year exile are nowhere to be found in the present day response. No contrition, no regret,

no disappointment, only a modicum of embarrassment – just enough to cure a very mild case of guilt and that's all.

The answer seems to be no more than a statement of fact that "each of us needs to consider multiple variables – familial, social and economic etc."

Well, what about halachah? Has Jewish law nothing to say about this most vital question? Indeed, every religious Jew in the Diaspora must come to grips with this crucial aspect of the question!

The Chazon Ish summed it all up in one terse sentence, "... the halachah has already been decided like the Rambam, Ramban and the other poskim that there is a mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisroel, and it is well known how much the Chofetz Chaim longed to go on aliyah."

The story is told of a Diaspora Jew who studied in depth the whole range of opinions about yishuv haAretz and then called and made an appointment with Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. The appointed day came; he arrived at the airport, took a cab to Sha'are Chesed, made his way up the steps and soon found himself in the Rosh Yeshiva's presence. He proceeded to begin to pour out all the knowledge he had committed to memory, when Rav Auerbach said softly in Yiddish, "Es iz nisht vichtig" - "It is not important." Our Diaspora hero was devastated – but nevertheless pressed on until he heard again, "It's not important." In his desperation he asked, "What does the Rosh Yeshiva mean, it's not important?" To which Rav Shlomo Zalman replied, "Just open up a Chumash and read and you will see that ratzon HaShem (G-d's will) is that Jews should live in Eretz Yisroel."

In this seemingly simple exchange Rav Shlomo Zalman expressed a significant and crucial dimension of halachah. The express will of HaShem has all the force and power of Divine imperative.

While I was in the throes of the painful process that led to our decision to go on aliyah I felt that I needed to consult a Godol HaTorah about an issue of a related nature. I was then the

rabbi of YI of West Hempstead, NY, and I decided to consult Rav Yaakov Kaminsky who was in Toronto at the time. I made an appointment with him and flew up for the day. The one and a half hour conversation with him was a spiritual experience never to be forgotten.

I wish to quote only one statement he made that is indelibly inscribed on my mind. "Reb Sholom, I hold that it is a mitzvah today, as it always was to live in Eretz Yisroel and if I could I would go to the airport now, get on a plane and go to Eretz Yisroel, but I can't..." Trust me his "I can't" was truly justified. The honesty, conviction, forcefulness and clarity of what Rav Yaakov said mixed with his obvious pain was deeply moving.

Well, you're thinking, what about the famous, oft-quoted psak of Rav Moshe Feinstein that living in Eretz Yisroel is not an obligatory mitzvah but rather "only" optional. A similar opinion is attributed to Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Solovetchik in Penini HaRav by Rabbi Hershel Schachter. I, for one, have embraced R. Moshe's psak with all my heart because I believe that there is a deeper significance to it. If we accept the opinion that yishuv Eretz Yisroel is an optional mitzvah then there opens up the magnificent opportunity for a religious Jew to truly perform a great mitzvah with absolutely no coercion at all. Not even the yoke of mitzvah hovers over him. One is afforded the choice to act in accordance with HaShem's will while under no obligation.

The Jew is a free agent, unfettered, unchained, unbound – and he can choose to live in Eretz Yisroel. It is an act of absolute free will. Similar to what the Malbim writes at the beginning of Parshat Teruma. It says "Take for Me a contribution for the construction of the mishkan." It does not say "give for me" for then it would be a positive commandment and obligatory on each and every one to donate. And HaShem wanted that the contributions should be motivated by one's heart, *nediv leebo*, and from his own free will, not as the result of any form of coercion. Would it have said "give" the vital in-

redient of pure choice would be compromised. So too the optional dimension of the mitzvah of yishuv haAretz endows it with great spiritual force

In 2010, I believe we have to reassess our personal approach to Eretz Yisroel. Many American Jews may still be frozen in a long outdated conception that Israel is a third world country with a bunch of nebechs who speak English with a bad accent (you should hear my grandchildren). It is no longer a poor, poverty stricken backward country begging for handouts. It is a formidable economic power; yes, one can make a living; housing can be as comfortable as anything you have in the U.S. Homes have value and retain it. Medical care is of very high quality, nowhere near as expensive as in the U.S. Families don't necessarily have to be separated by aliyah – the traffic in both directions is enormous. Note also that when one member of a family comes on aliyah the focus of the whole family changes. One *oleh* brings another. The vacation spot of choice becomes Israel. Some families see more of each other when one is here.

A recent study showed that there is hardly a major advance in science and technology in the world that is achieved without Israeli input. That's quite amazing when you come to think of it.

Furthermore, what will happen if political action in the U.S. turns out to be ineffective (it might, you know), useless, maybe even counterproductive – do you have your bags packed? What about the probability that the aliyah of 100,000 American religious Jews will strengthen Israel more than all the political action?

And what of an incident related in the Talmud: Resh Lakish, who lived in Eretz Yisroel, was once swimming in the Jordan River when Rabba Bar Bar Chanah who was from Babylonia came by and noticed him starting to leave the water. Thereupon he extended his hand to assist him. Resh Lakish then said, "G-d hates you Babylonians because you did not go on aliyah in the days of Ezra and thus prevented the Di-

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vine Presence from returning and resting on the Second Temple."

### **There Will Not be a Third Churban. Israel will not fall.**

I cast my vote with the vast majority of attendees [at the Religious Zionists of America, NY Shabbaton] who answered in the positive to the question "How many of you believe... that certainly G-d will never let our enemies destroy the Jewish State?" The author does not share their faith because he believes that "we have no guarantees that the State will not fall ... and more importantly these beliefs subvert our tefillot. Vitally we need to summon the kavanah that can only be stirred by the fear that the State of Israel might be destroyed, G-d forbid."

We in Israel face many grave dangers. Israel is the only state on the face of this earth that is repeatedly threatened with total destruction. Even our geographically closest neighbors in their charters, covenants, mosques, and parliaments call for our removal from the face of this earth. We have a great deal to pray for and I can't for a moment imagine that someone 6,000 miles away can have more kavanah than we do. Though I believe that "there will not be a third churban" we may, G-d forbid, suffer in many other ways. Jews are also paying a price. I am just thinking about the number of funerals of the victims of Arab terror that we have attended. We know the pain of all those whose lives have been

tragically changed by a terrorist bullet. We don't need to entertain the notion that "Israel might fall" for us to pray fervently.

Why do I believe that Israel will not fall? Of all the material available I will cite two – a magnificent comment of Rashi, and a heroic statement of Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog in 1942.

First the Rashi: The prophet Yechezkel says (38:8): "You [the enemies of Israel] will be repaid for your sins of ancient times, in the end of years you will come to a land restored from the sword, gathered from many nations, upon the mountains of Israel that had lain desolate continuously [until now that the mountains have given out their fruit and the land has been resettled by its people] against a people who had been brought out from the nations all of them dwelling in security." The prophet describes Eretz Yisroel, new, verdant and fruitful, settled by three distinct groups of Jews: (1) those returned from the sword (the survivors of the Shoah); (2) those gathered from many nations (the waves of olim from many Arab lands after the establishment of the State) ; and (3) a people who had been brought out from the nations. Of this third group the Malbim makes an awesome prophetic statement "that they were permitted to leave their land to settle in Eretz Yisroel." This is obviously the aliyah of Russian Jewry.

So the posuk is describing those who will come up against a tranquil Eretz Yisroel composed of all these Jews, with the intent to destroy them. Yechezkel goes on to say that the enemy will be decisively defeated and crushed.

### Now the awesome Rashi:

והיה לך לשום על לב שהיא מעמים הוצאה והמוציאה מן העמים לא יעזבנה בידך

"You should have understood that the One who took them out from the nations and brought them here will not abandon them in your hands."

There you have it. Rashi is saying clearly that all the cosmic, global, Divine planning that brought about the

establishment of the State and the ingathering of the exiles, the military strength, economic prosperity, a land that produces such abundant food, was not for naught. It was all the result of HaShem's outpouring of love and compassion for His people and, therefore, absolutely no one will be able to frustrate that which HaShem has wrought.

In the Spring of 1942 Rabbi Isaac Herzog, the second Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisroel, was in the United States with his wife on behalf of the Yishuv. As the security situation in Eretz Yisroel deteriorated he decided to return as quickly as possible. Rommel's Afrika Corps was racing across North Africa to El Alamein on the Egyptian border. With one more thrust he would make it into Eretz Yisroel. German forces in Europe were pushing ahead into Russia with the ultimate goal of entering the Holy Land from the North. A threat of total annihilation hung over the 400,000 Jews in the Yishuv.

The Chief Rabbi's friends and admirers tried to dissuade him from undertaking a dangerous journey through the Atlantic ocean infested with German submarines. Nothing could sway him from his resolve and determination. When asked if he was not afraid that Eretz Yisroel would fall into the hands of the Germans, he responded with conviction, "The enemy will not enter the gates of the land." He said further that our prophets spoke of a First Churban and then a Second Churban and no more. "There will not be a Third Churban."

Rav Herzog's prediction was borne out. Germany's first defeat was at El Alamein. Rommel did not enter the land from the south nor did the forces in Russia make it to the north. They were stopped at Stalingrad.

There are many unexpected rewards that come with embracing Eretz Yisroel. First and foremost is the age-old powerful Ahavat Eretz Yisroel that sustained the Jewish people through 2,000 years of exile. You become one with the Patriarchs, the Prophets, and Jews of all generations. One also learns that there is yet another and in some

sense more powerful and profound dimension about Eretz Yisrael that may overwhelm you one day, and that is the love of the earth itself. A love of the hills, the valleys, the springs and the brooks, the trees and the flowers, the birds, the goats of Ein Gedi, the awesome panoramic views that dazzle and excite the soul as they open up in all their majesty, the fields and the orchards, the olive trees and the statuesque palms, the hiking trails and the rushing winter rains pouring into the Kineret.

Rav Kook was caught in Switzerland and England for a few years during the First World War. Upon his return he marveled at the sight of the mountains of Yehuda as he ascended to Yerushalayim. One of his aides asked him, "But Rebbi you have just seen the majestic Alps?" To which he responded, "The Alps didn't speak to me. The mountains of Yehuda do – and they are mine."

As Rav Herzog was on the final leg of his arduous journey back to Eretz Yisroel on a train from Cairo to Rechovot he insisted on standing by an open window because he explained, "I will be able to smell Eretz Yisroel as we cross the border."

**Eretz Yisroel and aliyah must become a serious item on the active agenda of the American Torah-observant community. Jewish history is being written right here.**

**Eretz Yisroel is the Passion of Our Time! ▲**

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