

Man, Woman or Child

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We are rapidly approaching a dramatic moment in Jewish history that will eternally and existentially alter the face of our world. In but a few brief years an event will occur that will change the way in which we see ourselves and how we relate to the world around us.

Nearly ten years ago, in an article published in the Jerusalem Post, I predicted that towards the end of the century, a man, woman or child will step off a plane at Ben Gurion Airport and signal the beginning of a new era. At that moment Eretz Yisrael will become the largest Jewish community in the world. That was most certainly unthinkable and unimaginable fifty years ago when at its establishment, Israel numbered but a few hundred thousand Jews. To fully appreciate the drama of that moment it is important to compare Israel's population with that of the Second Commonwealth, the Period of Bayit Sheni. Scholars estimate that at the peak period of Jewish population, with 7 million Jews in Asia Minor, Eretz Yisrael numbered between 1,500,000 to a possible 2,350,000.

The center of Jewish life remained in Babylon, despite the call of Ezra and Nechemia and the last of the prophets for Jews to come on aliyah.

That number was passed here some 25 years ago. I don't believe that the milestone was marked in any way. Israel achieved it in 25 years not hundreds. That man, woman or child will take us back to the period of the First Commonwealth, Bayit Rishon.

Israel will surpass the United States, which is still the largest concentration of Jews in the world for fortunate and unfortunate reasons. The former, the result of massive waves of aliyah - precisely as predicted by the prophets. Also in no small measure due to a high birth-rate. The latter and truly unfortunate reason is the runaway assimilation, alienation and intermarriage that is eroding the Jewish presence in the United States. Vanishing American Jewry is the most tragic phenomenon of our age. A once tall, proud community is disappearing before our very eyes. My father אבא asked us (his three sons) in the 50's to tell him how many Jews there were in America. We told six million. He asked again in the 60's and 70's and our reply was the same. In pain he cried out "What has happened? Six million Jews in the 50's should certainly have increased by the 70's to eight or ten million or more." Yet it was not so, and we know why.

That man, woman or child will indeed only confirm what is already reality. The center of gravity of the Jewish world is here, in Eretz Yisrael. The Torah world, the cultural capital, the source of strength, the inspiration, and the future of Klal Yisrael is firmly rooted in Eretz Yisrael.

The powerful and poignant prophecy of “the ingathering of the exiles” continues to be fulfilled with every passing day. The words of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are the living reality here. We are the object of all the hopes, aspirations, prayers and tears of 2,000 years.

There is yet a further milestone to be reached - and that may occur in some 20 years from now, when again a man, woman or child, will step off the plane and will tip the scales once again - and the majority of the world’s Jews will be living here. That moment may have significant halachic ramifications. At that juncture, it may be that the observance of Shemittah will become Biblically mandated, and no longer only Rabbinical obligation. When the majority of the world’s Jews are here the very halachic status of Eretz Yisrael changes.

Incidentally, I no longer see any need to draw people back to Judaism by using sophisticated proofs of the existence of G-d, or the historic fact of revelation at Sinai etc. The absolute proof that the words of the prophets are true is here for all to behold. Beginning in Torah and then permeating the prophets, are the poetic passages that describe the ultimate return of Jews to Eretz Yisrael from all four corners of the world. Those prophecies of thousands of years ago have in fact been fulfilled. What better proof can there be that שכל דברי הנביאים אמת “all the words of the prophets are true.” What more powerful demonstration of the veracity of Torah is necessary?

The Maharal of Prague in the first chapter of Netzach Yisrael says that there are three situations that are unnatural, “and the unnatural can never become natural.” A people removed from their land is unnatural; a people whose members are separated from one another and dispersed to all four corners of the world, is unnatural; and a people that is not independent and master of its own destiny is unnatural. It is within nature that these three situations return to their original state.

In Shemoneh Esrei we pray:

תקע בשופר גדול לחרותנו ושא נס לקבץ גליותנו וקבצנו יחד מהרה מארבע כנפות הארץ לארצנו

Included in this prayer are all three of the unnatural states described by the Maharal and we pray that all should be returned to the natural state

תקע בשופר גדול לחרותנו

Sound the great shofar for our freedom, speaks of independence.

ושא נס לקבץ גליותנו

lift the banner to gather in our exiles calls for a reunited Jewish people.

וקבצנו יחד מהרה מארבע כנפות הארץ לארצנו

and gather us in together speedily from all four corners of the earth to our land.” calls for the return to our land.

Rabbi Yehuda Halevy concludes the Kuzari by stating: “Man’s love and yearning for the Holy Land will help speed the fulfilment and realization of the awaited promise, as it is said “You will rise and have compassion on Zion, when its time to be favored will come, when the appointed

time will come, when your servants will take pleasure in her stones and bestow their favor on her dust. Tehillim 102: 14, 15.

This means that Jerusalem will be rebuilt only when Jewry yearns for it, to the extent that even its stones and dust are precious to us.”

The last great reservoir for Aliyah is American Jewry. The challenge is great but so is the opportunity. American Jews have the advantage of being able to choose Aliyah freely and thereby fulfill a sense of purpose. You're not running from, but going to, and that could be an exhilarating feeling.

The time has arrived for you to become actual participants in the drama of Jewish history. The coming chapters are being written here.

I recall meeting Rabbi Nachman Kahana of the Young Israel of the Old City at a wedding in America. He looked around at the young people dressed beautifully and dancing with joy, and he turned to me and said, “My two sons are in Lebanon covered with dust, the sun beating down on them. These young people here have no such problems.” And then haltingly, he said to me, “It's an unfair distribution of historic responsibility.” His words continue to ring in my ears.

Study in Israel should become the universal rule for young men and women. One of the many outstanding achievements of this country is its educational opportunities. I learned here in Yeshiva in 1955-56 when there were so few Yeshivot for men or Seminars for women. The veritable explosion of Torah study is unprecedented and unparalleled in Jewish history.

Every Jewish child should be exposed to the beauty and sanctity of Eretz Yisrael. Israel should become the preferred place for visiting, vacationing and touring. It hurts to meet so many groups of non-Jews touring the country and so few Jewish groups. It is estimated that some 75-80% of American Jews have never set foot here. That is a situation that must be reversed.

The great Amora, Reish Lakish cried out in pain and anguish “I swear I hate you (Rashi: Babylonians who did not go up to Eretz Yisrael in the days of Ezra) for would you have come up more in the days of Ezra the Divine Presence would have descended upon the Temple and it would not have been destroyed” [Yoma 9b]. Reish Lakish is saying this some 700 or more years after Ezra and yet one can sense the resentment and anger. An historic opportunity of such proportions and such magnitude was allowed to pass without being seized passionately and embraced.

The Talmud in Berachot says “Would Jews have ascended in the days of Ezra, G-d would have done for them miracles as in the days of Joshua.” How tragic! - What could have been!

Since the Talmud speculated on what could have been it behooves us as well to investigate the great opportunities that can still be taken advantage of. The ending this time must be a happy one. So let's speculate. Would another 100,000 olim from the United States settled in Yehuda and Shomron, the very heartland of Biblical Eretz Yisrael, we would not be in our present precarious situation. Facts on the ground would speak more eloquently than any political pronouncements. Relinquishing land would not even be a matter for consideration. Would another 100,000

religious Jews come here with all the economic, cultural, and social power at their disposal, we would not have to suffer the incessant attacks of the reform movement who, with new found aggression and militant hostility, demand recognition. They expect us to tolerate, cooperate and collaborate with their destruction of Judaism. Their abject failure is apparent to all.

Would another 100,000 religious Jews vote in our elections they would make the religious bloc even more formidable than it is now. It would become self-evident that no government will ever be formed without the active participation of the orthodox community. Political power speaks loudest here. The impact of that electoral strength would go a long way towards silencing the voices of self-hatred that back anti-Semitic pejoratives. (Calling a religious minister this week “dirty Jew”.) Woe to ears who hear such terrible pronouncements.

Would another 100,000 Jews with the education and temperament of American upbringing join our ranks we would be better equipped to silence a so-called cultural, artistic and political left who mock and deride all that is holy to us; a left that collaborates with our enemies in the struggle for Eretz Yisrael.

Would another 100,000 Jews realize that while to the best of my recollection there is no Mitzvah to live in America - it is a Mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisrael.

We made a tragic mistake in the days of Ezra; and we made a genuine error by not joining the ranks of those who began to build this country in the early part of this century. We in fact abandoned Eretz Yisrael to secular Zionists.

It is not yet too late to rectify that serious error in judgment. We can become a major influence on the state, stature, and complexion of this country for centuries to come.

Israel is no longer some third world backward country. It is prosperous, economically strong, offering a wide variety of professional and business opportunities. Educational institutions of the highest caliber dot the country. The difficulties that caused people to hesitate about making aliyah no longer exist. The days of needing something (tuna fish, mayonnaise, etc.) from the States are over. Imagine - in a two block radius in the center of Yerushalayim, are situated a Mehadrin Nathans, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Dunkin Donuts, Bonkers Bagels - and just a way down the road - the Kotel HaMaaravi. You just cant beat that. That is not to say that it is easy. All change is powerful, agonizing and emotionally taxing - but it's worth it.

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Finally - Aliyah must become a top item on the agenda of the American Jewish community. Maybe one of you will be the man, woman or child that will change the course of Jewish history.

Chag Sameach from Yerushalayim.

Yom Haatzmaut, 1998