



Is Jewish Independence Relevant For The Rest of the World?

The Jewish people sing G-d's praises... this is [their] destiny. They recognize the power of G-d's work and bear witness to the Mighty One, Creator of all... 'And you are my witnesses, says G-d' (Yeshayahu 43:9).¹

When arranging his seminal book *Orot*, Rav Kook chose to open the section entitled “The Jewish People and their Revival” with the above words. By doing so, Rav Kook highlighted that our ultimate mission is to be G-d’s witnesses for all of humanity by bringing the entire world closer to the one true G-d and His values. Throughout this passage, Rav Kook references verses from Yeshayahu 43, in which the redemption of the Jewish people is cast as an event with universal significance. According to Yeshayahu, as channeled by Rav Kook, the Jewish people can only be true witnesses for G-d when they are gathered in redemption and live independently in the Land of Israel.

This idea, however, can be challenged by a crucial question. If our mission is to be a beacon of light for humanity, is not the Diaspora the ideal setting to realize this goal? Living scattered throughout the world allows Jews to have daily interactions with their non-Jewish neighbors which seemingly creates more opportunities to represent G-d and His Torah.² How can living as “a nation alone”³ facilitate a universal spreading of Divine ideals?

Rav Kook’s answer to this question can be expressed through analyzing the dual meaning of Yeshayahu’s description of the Jewish people as G-d’s “witnesses.”

On a basic level, the function of a witness is to accurately and effectively relay information. In this mode, the Jewish people are meant to live in such a fashion that they accurately represent the wisdom and beauty of G-d’s Torah for the world at large. While this can occur to a degree in exile, Rav Kook emphatically argues that the true breadth and depth of G-d’s vision can only be fully modeled when the Jewish people are living as an independent society in the Land of Israel. So many parts of the Torah can be fulfilled only when the Jewish people are living as a redeemed people in their own Land.⁴ In the Diaspora, there is a glass ceiling on the Jewish people’s ability to represent G-d’s *full* vision to the world at large.⁵

In addition, Rav Kook offers another layer of meaning to being G-d’s witnesses. This approach is rooted in an astonishing Midrash, which portrays G-d Himself as raising the stakes of the Jewish people’s status as His witnesses: “When you are My witnesses then I am G-d, but if you are not My witnesses then it is as if I am not G-d.”⁶ What is the meaning of this startling and cryptic statement? How can the Jewish people’s behavior impact whether G-d is G-d?

In numerous passages, Rav Kook explains that the Jewish people’s relationship with G-d goes beyond the fact that G-d chose them to live according to His Torah. Rather, in a way we cannot possibly understand, G-d Himself is present in the collective “soul” of the Jewish people. Thus, we find Rav Kook writing: “The Jewish people... are not separated from G-d at all, [rather they] are the clothing through which divinity is

revealed in this world.”⁷ Similarly, “The light of the *Shechina* is itself the Jewish people...”⁸ The Jewish people bear witness to G-d not only by modeling His values, but also through their very existence as a nation. Simply by living in accordance with their national character, the Jewish people draw more of the Divine Presence into this world.

We can now understand the universal significance of the Jewish people living as an independent nation in their own Land. When they are scattered, persecuted and unable to live as a nation, G-d is simply less present in this world – “it is as if I am not G-d.” In contrast, when Jewish peoplehood is manifest in the form of a nation in its own Land that lives fully Jewishly, then more of divinity is drawn into the world. In this sense, the State of Israel can truly be “the foundation of G-d’s throne in the world,”⁹ and bring blessings to all of humanity.

1 *Orot, Yisrael UTechiyato, piska 1.*

2 This advantage of living in exile is highlighted by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (*Nineteen Letters*, letter 9; *Horeb*, 13) and the Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Torat Menachem* 5743:2, 636).

3 Bamidbar 23:9.

4 See, for example, *Orot HaTechiya, piska 5.*

5 Elsewhere (*Ma’amarei HaReiyah* p. 150-151), Rav Kook adds that the Jewish people will only have the self-confidence to proudly share their message with the world when they are redeemed.

6 Yalkut Shimoni, Yeshayahu, *remez* 455.

7 *Orot Yisrael* 1:4.

8 *Ibid* 1:8.

9 *Ibid* 6:7.

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