Three Reasons to Rejoice on Yom Yerushalayim

First of all, we are not just celebrating the liberation of Yerushalayim. We are also celebrating Tel Aviv and Netanya. Anyone who was here during the period before the Six-Day War can verify that. The entire existence of the young State of Israel was in danger in 1967. Our 19-year-old State survived, grew several times, and returned to its biblical lands.

Second, because the dream has been fulfilled. Elie Wiesel, Nobel laureate, once said that Yerushalayim connects us to one another in a way that is difficult to explain. When a Jew visits Yerushalayim for the first time, he says, “This is not the first time.” He has returned home. A friend of mine, an immigrant from Ethiopia, told me years ago how every time she and her brothers saw a stork flying in the sky during their childhood in Addis Ababa, they used to shout: “Stork, stork, how is Yerushalayim?” Natan Sharansky once told how when he and his friends were accused of betraying “Mother Russia,” they were asked by the court to summarize their arguments. Sharansky responded, “I have nothing to say to this court, but to the people of Israel and my wife I say: next year in Yerushalayim.” We are living a 2,000-year-old prophecy that is coming true day by day.

And third, and most importantly, we are happy today because of the enormity of our contemporary challenge. We won the lottery, and now, what do we do with the winnings? Our mission is to turn all this energy, all the weeks and longings and prayers of thousands of years, into tachles – purpose. That the Yerushalayim of Heaven and Yerushalayim of Earth will combine. That this place will indeed exemplify an alternative culture for the whole world.

We are on our way. After the paratroopers entered the Old City in 1967, Chana Zemer, Editor of the secular, left-leaning newspaper “Davar,” wrote: “Redeemer. For 2,000 years, 80 generations, Jews turned to the East – Shacharit, Mincha and Arvit. For thousands of years, the national memory a Jew is born with, the same way he is born with his organs, has not blurred. All the verses are now being resurrected before our eyes.”

We must never forget that our great-great-grandparents did not imagine they would have to pay property taxes in Yerushalayim, sit in traffic there and quarrel and argue about the character of the city. We won.

Whose Land?

We are used to hearing about “our right to the Land.” In politicians’ speeches on Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom HaAtzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, we hear repeatedly that Israel is our country. On the other hand, Parashat Behar says, “But the Land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the Land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me.” This phrase, “strangers resident” sounds familiar. Avraham Avinu also presents himself as “a resident stranger among you.” And many years later, when we already had sovereignty, King David convenes the people for prayer in Jerusalem, saying, “For we are sojourners with You, mere transients like our fathers.”

Why not just say we own this Land? Why continue to always feel a little strange about it? Why didn’t Avraham Avinu and King David speak as confidently as the politicians do nowadays?

Many commentators explain that the Land will be ours... if we deserve it. Depending on our behavior. Like a safe with a code, the Land of Israel has an entry code. There is certain conduct it requires from us. Certainly, it is our place in the world, and there is no doubt we need to fight those who try to erase that affinity. But it must be with a sense of humility – of “I wish we would be worthy,” rather than a powerful sense of “We deserve it.” Or as Rav Chanan Porat used to say, “We shouldn’t talk about our right to the Land. We should talk about our duty to the Land.”
Why is the Torah a gift? Rabbi Shimshon Pinkus explains: “If a man looks like he’s wearing a good watch, we’ll ask where he bought it. But if a poor man has a $5 million diamond in his hands, we won’t ask ‘Where did you buy it?’, but rather, ‘Who gave it to you?’ because he couldn’t have bought it himself.

The Holy Torah is a gift. As much as we learn and do good deeds, its gift to us is always free. One thing is required of us: the desire to have it. To want the gift! Our job on Shavuot is to want the Torah, to think about it. A person will only give his friend a precious diamond if he knows he will keep it and appreciate it. He will not give the diamond if the recipient is just going to play with it in the sand.

Each and every year, when it comes to Shavuot, it is as though G-d is traveling the world, asking each of us: Do you want to receive the Torah? Do you? And we answer: ‘Yes, we will do and we will hear.’ Although we are limited, we will be affected by the Torah on Shavuot... if we really want to be.”

On a recent flight from the United States to Israel, I suddenly paid attention to the routine security question: “Has anyone given you anything to pass on to someone else?”

I said no, but the truth is that someone did give me something to pass on. During our visit, we were privileged to meet Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky, 95, Head of the Philadelphia Yeshiva, one of America’s most prominent spiritual leaders. At the end of the fascinating conversation with him and his wife, Rabbanit Tammy, we asked what the Rabbi’s message was to the public in Israel. Rabbi Kamenetzky immediately replied: “Now? My message to the public, not only in Israel, is that we have left Egypt, we have discarded slavery for freedom, and Matan Torah is fast approaching. One has to ask oneself if he remembers Shavuot is nearing, whether he recalls receiving the Torah, and how is he preparing for the Torah and moving toward that goal.”

There. I’ve passed it on. Now it’s your turn.

On Shavuot, when we receive the Torah again, we may think that our part of the story is not so critical. After all, there are about 14 million Jews in the world, and some of them are really smart and righteous, so why are we so important?

Rav Kook addresses that very question: “The renewed light of the Torah’s connection to this soul is not like the light born of its connection to another soul. And if it does, it increases the Torah correctly in its study.” That is, every soul that studies Torah magnifies the light in the world, and only that soul – your soul – can create its special light.

You can’t copy homework and it’s not enough to let others learn.

You have to find your own special light that only you can shine upon the world.

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