

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



THANKSGIVING AND GEULAH

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

If every option at every fork in every road in life leads to Rome, then energy spent on deciding or thinking is wasted. If history inevitably ends in Redemption, then one can mark every moment of history as leading to redemption. But this makes the whole concept of “leading to redemption” meaningless, useless, and even silly.

Free will entails the possibility that human choices will delay Redemption, and therefore that some events are not Redemptive in any meaningful sense. They may distance Redemption rather than bringing it nearer, or – and this may be the most painful to confront – they may have massive individual or national repercussions, positive or negative, and yet be neutral on the axis of Redemption.

For example: The State of Israel might fight *chas veshalom* a long and bloody war of attrition that has no Redemptive consequences. Individuals would be killed or wounded; the economy might radically shift, expand, or contract; and the political discourse might change radically. But the prospects for Redemption, or *chas veshalom* Churban, might be exactly the same at the end of the war as at its beginning.

There are many good reasons to avoid getting into such a war. But there are no theological reasons that it can't happen.

It is therefore essential to affirm explicitly that from an authentic Jewish perspective, meaningfulness and Redemptiveness are distinct categories. Actions can be profoundly and positively meaningful and yet have no effect on Redemption, perhaps even make it less likely.

We must also acknowledge that terrible actions might make early Redemption more likely. Yeshiva students often point to the midrash about G-d needing to take us out of Egypt before we fell into the irredeemable “fiftieth level of tum'ah”, and the position that Moshiach will come in the time of a completely evil generation, and so forth, and wonder whether a Frankist strategy of sinning extravagantly isn't more likely to succeed at bringing Redemption than a strategy of trying to deserve it. So we need to make a second point explicitly: An action that would otherwise be wrong cannot be justified on the ground that it will bring Redemption nearer.

I am agnostic about the existence and value of actions that are ethically or morally neutral but bring the Messianic Era closer. In other words, it is not clear to me that Redemption is a religious value independent of building a society worthy of

being redeemed, or that human beings can strategize about the coming of Redemption in any other way.

Let's consider the relationship of these reflections for Religious Zionism, with the spoiler that I identify as a religious Zionist.

Much of traditional Jewry believed for many years, along with the Catholic Church, that since Exile was a Divine punishment for Jewish sins, human beings could not reverse it by direct action, only via repentance. To be clear, no one thought that Jews could not successfully live in the Land, and some or most thought that living in the land fulfilled a mitzvah and was as obligatory as any other positive commandment. However, they thought that achieving Jewish sovereignty in the land would happen only at G-d's direct, i.e. prophetic, instigation.

In principle, this position could not account for Rabbinic support for the Bar Kochba rebellion, before he was declared a False Messiah, whether that conclusion was reached before or after his defeat. The usual solution was to make the category “prophetic” a little elastic.

A simpler solution was available. The Bar Kochba rebellion deserved support if it had a chance of succeeding, even if it was not Messianic or Redemptive. Bar Kochba failed not because Jewish sovereignty could be achieved only by a true Messiah, but rather because he claimed falsely to be a Messiah and/or because his rebellion had no plausible chance of succeeding without open miraculous Divine intervention, which was not deserved.

One might argue that by the 19th century, Orthodox Jewry was in a different religious position relative to Jewish sovereignty in Israel than the Rabbis of Bar Kochba's time. So far as I can see, the only basis for such a claim is the famous sugya of “The Three Oaths”. Let's assume that one of the many, many approaches to sidelining that sugya is correct. Regardless, we are now in the position of evaluating a successful Bar Kochba revolt that at least as yet has not led to a Messianic or Redemptive Era.

The last sentence itself is not obvious. We might argue that Jewish sovereignty is per se Redemptive according to Maimonides, certainly if the sovereign Jewish state allows many thousands of men to do nothing at all but study Torah.

Nonetheless, to my knowledge this position has little or no support in the Orthodox community, even or especially amongst those whom the sovereign Jewish state allows to do nothing at all but study Torah. Adopting this position would require a whole new religious vocabulary aimed at improvement within Redemption. Perhaps something like *shippur hageulah*?

Religious Zionism assumes instead that Redemption requires a Temple (certainly) and an individual Messiah (probably). Occasionally there is also discussion of whether Redemption requires genuine freedom of action in both domestic and foreign affairs, unencumbered by entangling alliances with powerful empires and the like.

Today there is no Temple, no declared Messiah, and for good or ill, Israel's actions are significantly constrained by its alliance with the United States among others. We are therefore not Redeemed, even if we live in Israel. So what sort of time do we live in?

One common answer is that we live in an *atchalta d'geulah*, a preliminary stage of Redemption, a proto-Geulah. Years ago on Yom HaAtzmaut, Rav Yehuda Parnes *shlita* offered to debate the term with self-identifying Religious Zionists in his shiur at YU, but *kedarko bakodesh* as a Brisker, only if they could first define it to his satisfaction. They could not. I don't remember the details, except that I had no useful contribution to make.

Issues that deserve formulated answers include: Does *atchalta d'geulah* guarantee that some or all of the possible symptoms of *geulah*, such as sovereignty in a portion of the land, settlement in a somewhat different portion, and the increased fertility of much of the land, cannot be reversed? Does it guarantee that a further state of Redemption, or the final stage of Redemption, will occur before a specific date? Should strategic or tactical military, political, and economic decisions be made differently than they would be in a non-*atchalta d'geulah* era?

One possible response is to say that *atchalta d'geulah* is a recognition of the goods of the present rather than any claim about the future. Some of the things we hope for in Redemption exist to some extent in some unredeemed times. Marking them as Redemptive encourages us to fulfill our thanksgiving obligation, to express gratitude for them, and to value their achievement and preservation. But nothing guarantees their preservation, any more than the rediscovery of *tkheilet* (if one accepts that it has been rediscovered) guarantees that a particular mollusk will thrive regardless of climate change. We should however give that mollusk some priority in conservation efforts.

Anyone who reads Tanakh through the eyes of Chazal knows that we have approached Redemption several times in the past, only to be pushed back to what seems the very beginning. Every reader of the narratives of Tanakh also knows that we don't know how G-d keeps score, and whether our specific triumphs or tribulations are owed to present or rather past acts of virtue or vice. And that's with the assistance of prophecy! For example, the wicked may prosper because of a righteous grandparent, and vice versa.

What makes this difficult for us to accept as applicable to our own experience is a sense or conviction that the State of Israel's existence and flourishing are astoundingly unlikely, to the point of being miraculous, Maybe add in a feeling that rational calculation would have pulled the plug on the Zionist project many times before it succeeded, and therefore rational calculation continues to be out of place after its success. (Perhaps include as well a conviction that no theodicy could possibly justify the Shoah on the axis of justice, and therefore a vague and endlessly self-contradictory feeling that on balance we are owed some undeserved Redemption.)

It goes without saying that these are the sort of calculations that lead people to gamble away their jackpot winnings, even if their initial decision to gamble was rationally defensible. I don't think the halakhic obligation not to rely on miracles ceases to apply after the first miracle. I also don't think that the obligation to be grateful for miracles and to value their beneficial outcome applies only to the self-perpetuating kind.

Shabbat shalom!

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