

Fate and Destiny

Israel Needs a Vision

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לישראל אין חזון

This was a headline כותרת בעיתונות this week – part of statement was made by Abe Foxman, former head of the ADL – a man dedicated to defending Jews and Israel. He tried to explain the dilemma that Israel is in today following its campaign against Hamas, that didn't exist following a similar campaign in 2014.

He explained his point in an interview as follows:

There is something else, and I apologize, but Israel has no vision. Israel needs a vision to share with the world. Survival is important. It's first, second and third. But after that? Israel has lost its vision, its mission. Startup is wonderful and startup is exciting. But if all [Israel is saying is that] you're going to attack to save your life, then what? Israel has no answer to "then what." There has to be more. I don't care if it's a two-state solution, a three-state solution, confederation, whatever it is. But there's nothing except "understand that we have to defend ourselves."

יש משהו אחר, ואני מתנצל, אבל לישראל אין חזון. ישראל זקוקה לחזון שהיא יכולה לשתף אותו עם העולם. השְׁרָדוֹת היא חשובה. היא [בחשיבות] ראשונה, שניה ושלישית. אבל אחרי כן? ישראל איבדה את החזון שלה, את מְשִׁמָּתָה. סטארטאפ הוא נהדר והסטארטאפ הוא מרגש. אך אם כל מה [שישראל אומרת היא] שהיא הולכת לתקוף כדי להציל את חייה, אז מה? לישראל אין תשובה ל"אז מה". צריך להיות יותר. לא איכפת לי אם מדובר בפתרון של שתי מדינות, פתרון של שלושה מדינות, קונפדרציה, מה שיהיה. אבל [ישראל אינה מצהירה על] שום דבר מלבד "תבינו שאנחנו צריכים להגן על עצמנו."

Difficult words. Important words. How are we to respond? The answer is in parshat Behaalotecha.

במדבר פרשת בהעלותך פרק י (ב) עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שְׁתֵּי חֲצוּצֹת כֶּסֶף מְקֻשָּׁה תַעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם וְהָיוּ לָךְ לְמִקְרָא הָעֵדָה וּלְמִסַּע אֶת הַמַּחֲנֹת:

R. Soloveitchik (Fate and Destiny, "camp and congregation," p 57-60) here notes that there are two designations for the people: Edah and Machaneh. They are two different sociological phenomena entirely:

“The camp is created as a result of the desire for self defense and is nurtured by a sense of fear; the congregation is created as a result of the longing for the realization of an ethical idea and is nurtured by the sentiment of love. Fate reigns, in unbounded fashion, in the camp; destiny reigns in the congregation.”

"המחנה נוצר כתוצאה מהרצון להגנה עצמית, ומטופח על ידי תחושת פחד; העדה נוצרת כתוצאה מהפְּמִיקָה למימוש רעיון אתי ומטופחת על ידי רגש של האהבה. הגורל שולט ... במחנה; היעוד שולט בעדה."

And this brings us to R. Soloveitchik's great thesis of Fate and Destiny. We as a people were thrown together by fate – we share a common history and this binds us as a people. But if our national identity is based solely in the past, from Mitzraim to Nazi Germany – we really don't have much to do other than fight for survival together. Animals, explains R. Soloveitchik, band together for survival. And this is the tragedy of the Jewish people today. The vast majority of Jews identify only with the fate aspect of our peoplehood. We come together on Holocaust Day or when we under attack.

But this is not what makes us people. This is not what makes us the Jewish people.

There is another aspect – Destiny. We have a goal (tachlit), a plan (tochint), a vision (hazon). And that vision is rooted in the term Edah – Eid (witness). To what are we witness – to the past, of course, but also to the future. We stand as witnesses that there is a Creator, a creator with a plan (tochnit) and a goal (tachlit). It is up to us to ever seek to fulfill this goal – that is our vision, our hazon.

It is up to us to turn fate into destiny.

But this is not simple. R. Soloveitchik explains that it takes great human creativity (yetziratyut) to do this. He writes:

Against your will you are born and against your will you will die.

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ד משנה כב... על כרחך אתה נולד ... ועל כרחך אתה מת

Man is born like an object, dies like an object, but possesses the ability to live like a subject, like a creator, an innovator ...

האדם נולד כמו אובייקט, מת כמו אובייקט, אך בעל יכולת לחיות כמו סובייקט, כמו יוצר, חדשן ...

This terminology of “innovator” struck me as amazing in light of the words of Abe Foxman with which we started. Israel is known as the INNOVATOR of the world, we are the Startup nation – I recently read that we are the third best tech ecosystem (סביבה תומכת) in the world – only behind the US and the UK! We are HADSHANIM – it's in our DNA – but we have focused our talents on the immediate and not the eternal (הרגי (ולא הנצהי). Let me be clear here. I am certainly not suggesting we stop innovating in

science and technology, that shutdown all the startups and all go and sit in yeshiva. I am calling on all of us to realize that we must use our talents for creativity (yetziratiut), to turn fate in to destiny. We can and must apply ourselves in both realms of creativity.

We have been fated to live in a rough neighborhood, surrounded by radical Islamic fundamentalists. They have managed to justify to the world that the targeting of innocent civilians is OK – in direct violation of the Geneva conventions, while the ICC wants to put us on trial for war crimes! We must realize that the only way to change this fate is by focusing on destiny, by putting forth – first and foremost for ourselves – a plan to achieve something greater than just surviving. We need to tell the world that we are Israel, ancient Israel, biblical Israel and we have returned to our land to fulfill every last prophecy of being a witness to God's plan to bring peace on earth - to be a light unto the nations, to exemplify ethical living.

We must combine both aspects of our peoplehood; combine both machaneh (camp) and eida (witnesses). And is this not the prophetic message of the Haftarah:

"This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, saying: 'Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,' says the Lord of Hosts.

זכריה פרק ד (ו) וַיַּעַן וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי לְאָמֹר זֶה דְּבַר יְקֹזֵק אֶל זְרֻבָּבֶל לֵאמֹר לֹא בְחֵיל וְלֹא בְכֹחַ כִּי אִם בְּרוּחֵי אֱמֶר יְקֹזֵק צְבָאוֹת:

Let us realize that this verse is not saying we should close down our army and simply pray to God. God himself knows and commands that we defend ourselves – is not the Mashiach himself to fight God's wars?! Of course we need military strength, of course we need MACHANEH – we need to defend ourselves. What this verse is saying is simply defending ourselves is not enough. We must have an answer to “and then what?” The answer is in identifying with God's spirit (ruchi). It is not by military force that we will succeed in turning fate in to destiny, but only by attaching to our purpose, to the RUACH of which we are to be the EIDIM, the witnesses – then we will merit the prophetic blessing at the beginning of the Haftara:

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for, behold! I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord.

זכריה פרק ב (יד) רְנִי וְשִׂמְחִי בֵּת צִיּוֹן כִּי הִנְנִי בָּא וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָךְ נְאֻם יְקֹזֵק:

כן יהיה רצון.