"Ha-Tikva" Then and Now

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YOM HA-ATZMAUT 5769

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"*Ha-Tikva*" – Then and Now

By Harav Ya'akov Medan

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Israel's national anthem, "*Ha-Tikva*," is the first stanza of a poem written by Naftali Herz Imber (1856-1909), with amendments to its closing lines. Over a hundred years ago, the poem was the unofficial anthem of the early pioneers in *Eretz Yisrael*. It was, for all intents and purposes, the anthem of the Zionist movement; it was sung when David Ben-Gurion declared the establishment of the state, and later became the official national anthem. The strange circumstances under which it attained its official status, the problematic personality of its composer, and - most of all - its content, which is seemingly irrelevant to a nation that has already realized its vision and dwells in its land, have given rise to the question of whether it should be replaced by a more appropriate choice.

Such suggestions have been raised by various groups from time to time, and especially by Religious Zionists. One of the more widely known proposals was to adopt chapter 126 of *Tehillim* (*Shir ha-ma'alot be-shuv Hashem…*) as our national anthem. After certain figures in the government who had signed the Oslo Accords proposed replacing "*Ha-Tikva*" with "*Shir ha-Shalom*" (the "Song of Peace"), a song that depicts the soldiers and citizens who gave their lives for the establishment of Israel as victims who died in vain, the Religious Zionist camp became the most vociferous defenders of the present anthem.

I will attempt here to identify some elements connecting this poem with concepts emanating from authentic Jewish sources.

A. Exile and Hope

The words, "*od lo avda tikvatenu*," "our hope is not yet lost," are borrowed from Yechezkel's prophecy concerning the dry bones. In that context, the House of Israel in exile declare, "Our bones are dried and our hope is lost (*avda tikvatenu*); we have been cut off" (*Yechezkel* 37:11). The composer of "*Ha-Tikva*" argues that the loss of hope is the result of an internal process, rather than objective circumstances that are imposed upon the nation by external forces.

An independent nation in its own land is a living organism, with a brain and a heart. A nation that loses its land and its independence is like a body that is brain-dead; it is incapable of doing anything, but its heart continues to beat. A body with a beating heart, even if its brain is not functioning, is not dead; it exists in a coma. It cannot actively perform any action, but the body does not decay and decompose. When salvation comes for the brain, the body will be ready to carry out its commands. Similarly, as long as the nation in exile retains hope in its heart, its flesh will not decompose and its bones will not scatter. When the time of salvation arrives, there will remain a nation that is ready to be redeemed.

The prophet Yechezkel speaks about an exiled nation mired in despair; they are thus compared to corpses that are not only lifeless but whose flesh and skin have decomposed and whose bones have been scattered. "*Ha-Tikva*" likewise describes a nation in exile, but the soul of this nation is alive and its eyes look towards Zion. (As Rav Charlap explains ["*Ma'ayanei Ha-Yeshu'a*," part I, in *Mei Marom*, vol. VI], the anticipation of salvation is often greater than the salvation itself.)

B. Hope and Reality

Both Yechezkel's prophecy and "*Ha-Tikva*" speak of despair and hope in exile. The prophecy, as we would expect, also addresses the solution to the problem. According to Yechezkel, the end of the exile lies entirely in the hands of God, just as only God can resurrect the dead. In contrast, the poem (in its original form) concludes with the nation still in exile, leading to the claim that it is inappropriate as the anthem of a State that has shaken off the dust of exile and risen from the ashes.

However, hope has another aspect to it, as expressed in the words of Iyov:

> A mortal, born of a woman, is of few days, and full of trouble. He emerges like a flower, but is cut down; he flees like a shadow and does not endure… Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You; You have set his bounds and he cannot pass them. Turn from him that he may rest, until like a hireling his day is accomplished. **For there is hope for a tree**, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again and that its tender shoots will not cease. While its roots may grow old in the earth and its trunk die in the ground, from the scent of water it will bud and bring forth

branches like a living plant. But man dies and is laid low; man perishes and where is he? With all the waters of the sea, and after the river is parched and dried up, man lies and does not rise, until the heavens are no more; they shall not awaken nor be raised from their slumber… Surely the mountain falling crumbles, and the rock is moved from its place. As the waters wear away the stones, its torrents washing away the dust of the earth, **so You cause man's hope to be lost**. (*Iyov* 14:1-19)

In Iyov's metaphor, man is compared to a plant that withers – "until like a hireling his day is accomplished." Man has no connection with the earth, whose days are without number. His labor upon the earth is like the work of a hireling on his master's land. The time allotted for his work is set in advance, and when it is over, he leaves with no care or feeling for the fate of the land that he has tilled. For man, the land is nothing but a source of financial profit. Severed from the land, which expresses eternity, his life is a fleeting moment, like a wildflower with no roots to anchor its existence. His death is inevitable and hopeless, like that of a withering plant. The inescapable conclusion is that "You cause man's hope to be lost."

For a tree, in contrast, there is hope. Even if it is cut down, it may yet sprout anew. Even if it grows old and withers, it will come alive at the mere hint of water. Its fate is different from the fate of man, owing to its connection with the timeless earth. The tree's roots are firmly planted in the ground, and it continually draws its sustenance and nourishment from the earth. Death is therefore foreign to it; more importantly, it knows no despair.

Above, we contrasted the hope expressed in Imber's "*Ha-Tikva*" and the lack of hope among the exiles in Babylon in Yechezkel's prophecy. Let us now consider a similar contrast between the loss of hope for man in *Iyov* and the hope expressed by the Rambam in his presentation of the commandment to sanctify the new moon:

I shall add the following explanation for you: Were it possible, for example, that there would be no Jews living in *Eretz Yisrael* (Heaven forefend that God should do this, for He promised that the remnants of the people would never be entirely uprooted)… then our calculations would not help us in any way whatsoever [and we would lack the ability to sanctify the months and the festivals]… (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, positive commandment 153)

According to Iyov, a tree has hope because its roots are planted in the ground; thus, even if its trunk is cut, new life may spring from its concealed roots. Man, on the other hand, is severed from the earth, and his death represents final and irrevocable cessation. The Rambam asserts that the roots of the Jewish nation are planted and anchored in the ground of its land. Even during the exile, there was never a time when the Jewish presence in the land ceased entirely. The small number of families who maintained the continuity of Jewish settlement, under foreign domination and very difficult conditions,

represent the roots concealed in the earth by virtue of which the nation will once again come alive and flourish in its land. Had these roots ceased, heaven forefend, the remnants of the nation in the land would have disappeared entirely, the sanctity of the festivals would have no validity, and the blessing "Who sanctifies Israel and the appointed times" would no longer have any meaning.

Both in Iyov's metaphor and in Rambam's *halakha*, hope is dependent upon a connection with eternity, represented by a connection with the land. Acording to Iyov, man's connection with the land is devoid of roots, while the Rambam maintains that roots do indeed exist, at least in terms of the nation as a whole.

Let us now compare the Rambam's "hope" with that of Imber. Both address the riddle of Israel's endurance throughout exile, but in different ways. In his youth, Imber received a Chassidic education. In his view, even a nation that has been extinguished in exile, and which has no roots in and grasp on reality, may still draw the source of its vitality from the inner, psychological processes of "*nefesh Yehudi homiya*" ("a Jewish soul stirs") and "*ayin le-Tzion tzofiya*" ("its eye looks to Zion"). The Rambam adopts a more realistic understanding of history. He seeks the roots of an awakening in reality itself, in the actual presence of Jews in God's land. If the isolated families living in the land were, in Rambam's view, the roots preserving the life of the nation, whose trunk and branches were in exile, then now, with the trunk sitting firmly in God's land, there is certainly a firm basis for hope.

C. Stones Eroded by Water

In his battle against the despair projected by Iyov, the Rambam is preceded by his great master in the laws pertaining to Israelite kingship – Rabbi Akiva. Like Iyov, Akiva was also brought to the brink of despair when he undertook, as an illiterate, mature adult, to start studying Torah in all its immense breadth and depth. Akiva's mind and heart were blocked up after so many years of shepherding and harboring resentment towards the Torah and its scholars. Interestingly, both Iyov and Akiva, as they approach despair, are confronted with a similar sight of stones that are shaped and molded by drops of water that flow over them. Iyov responds to this sight by declaring, "**As the waters wear away the stones, its torrents washing away the dust of the earth, so You cause man's hope to be lost.**" In other words, there is no hope for man against the natural forces of wear and tear and decay. He will perish and be consumed just like the stone that is worn away by the water flowing over it.

Akiva considers the same phenomenon from a different perspective:

> How did Rabbi Akiva start out?
> They said: he was forty years old and had never studied anything. Once he stood at a well. He said, "Who engraved this stone?"

They told him, "[It was] the water, which drips upon it every day." And they said to him, "Akiva, are you not familiar [with the verse,] 'As the waters wear away the stones'?"

On the spot, Rabbi Akiva made the following deduction: If something soft [like water] could chisel its way through something hard [like stone], then surely the words of Torah, which are as hard as iron, can penetrate my heart, which is flesh and blood!" Immediately, he returned to studying Torah.

He went with his son, and they sat in front of teachers of young children. He said, "Rabbi, teach me Torah!" Rabbi Akiva held one end of the tablet and his son held the other end. He wrote him *"alef*" and "*bet*" and he learned them. Then he wrote from "*alef*" to "*tav*" and he learned it. He taught him *Torat Kohanim* and he learned it. He continued stdying until he had learned the entire Torah. (*Avot De-Rabbi Natan*, version 1, chapter 6)

Iyov looked at the stone's erosion and it led him to despair. Akiva focused on the power of the water and its effect on the stone, and that gave him hope and strength.

It was not only for himself that Rabbi Akiva drew hope, but for his entire nation. Just as the stone was strong and hard, so the Roman empire was strong and hard towards the nations that were crushed under its dominion. But the nation of Israel was as weak and soft as water. And just as water flows from a high place to a low place, Israel fell from the elevated, glorious heights of the Hasmonean kingdom to the abyss of subjugation and the destruction of the Temple. Nevertheless, Rabbi Akiva maintained his faith in their power:

On another occasion, they went up to Jerusalem. When they reached Mount Scopus, they tore their garments. When they reached the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies. They began to weep, but Rabbi Akiva laughed.

They said to him, "Why are you laughing?"

He said to them, "Why are you weeping?"

They said, "The place concerning which it is written, 'The stranger who approaches shall be put to death,' now has foxes roaming over it; shall we not weep?!"

He said to them, "That is why I laugh… The text links the prophecy of Zekharia to that of Uria. In Uria's case, it says, 'Therefore, because of you Zion shall be plowed like a field.' In Zekharia it says, 'Old men and old women shall yet sit in the courtyards of Jerusalem.' So long as Uria's prophecy had not yet been fulfilled, I feared that Zekharia's prophecy would not come about. Now that Uria's prophecy has come about, I know for certain that Zekharia's prophecy, too, will be realized."

With these words they said to him, "Akiva, you have comforted us! Akiva, you have comforted us." (*Makkot* 24b)

Perhaps one might think that Rabbi Akiva concerned himself only with inner, psychological processes of consolation over the destruction, and that the processes that he envisioned were for the distant future and experienced only at great intervals. But this is not so; the hope that flooded him at the sight of the fox emerging from the place of the Holy of Holies was not mere grist for speeches. On the basis of that fox, and on the basis of that lesson, Rabbi Akiva educated a generation – tens of thousands of scholars who, led by Bar Kokhba, rebelled against the Roman tyrant. It was not mere psychological comfort that Rabbi Akiva drew from the fox and from its lesson; rather, he drew true hope and faith, with real roots planted deeply in the land. This was hope with practical consequences.

D. Vision and Fulfillment

> Once, Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva were in a boat. Rabbi Akiva made a *sukka* on the boat. The next day, the wind blew it away. Rabban Gamliel said to him, "Akiva, where is your *sukka*?" (*Sukka* 23a)

Cynics, skeptics, and those who hold our sages in scorn could view the above *beraita* as a summary of Rabbi Akiva's entire national endeavor in the Bar Kokhba rebellion: unrestrained optimism and excess energy, producing castles in the air unable to stand up to a moderate wind; a tree boasting a thick trunk and heavy branches, but with no real roots, easily overturned in the breeze. The skeptics would no doubt take such a view of Rabbi Akiva's speech upon seeing the fox. After all, it was not elderly Jewish men and women who sat enjoying the sunshine in the courtyards of Jerusalem after the Bar Kokhba rebellion had ended; rather, there were piles of corpses – tens of thousands – with no one to bury them. But this is not so: "If the Holy One, blessed be He, ensures that no mistake comes about through the animals of the righteous, then how much more so through the righteous themselves!" (*Ketuvot* 28b).

Like the prophecies of the biblical prophets, Rabbi Akiva's vision and teaching were not unaffected by the decisions taken by the generation of redemption and its leaders. Bar Kokhba was worthy of redeeming Israel, and Rabbi Akiva's students were worthy of bringing about the redemption together with him. According to the testimony of the Jerusalem Talmud (*Ta'anit* 4:5), Rabbi Akiva declared concerning Bar Kokhba, "This is the King Messiah." However, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:3-4) interprets these words as meaning, "He has the **potential** to be the Messiah." Only "if he would act successfully… then it would be certain that he was the Messiah." Bar Kokhba was assumed to be the Messiah "until he was killed, for his sins," and it is not for slight wrongdoings that the redemption was postponed.

Bar Kokhba's declaration to God, "Do not aid us and do not hinder us," and his killing of Rabbi Elazar ha-Moda'i (Jerusalem Talmud, ibid.) express the degree to which he was disconnected from the spiritual process of redemption guided by the spiritual leaders of the generation. This may also explain

why entire regions in *Eretz Yisrael* failed to cooperate with Bar Kokhba in his rebellion against Rome. Rabbi Akiva's original hope was a true and genuine one, but it failed owing to the sins of the generation.

E. Hope and Despair

The voice of the skeptic is not yet stilled. The vision and the hope, he claims, are all very well, but the attempt to bring about their realization is a messianic delusion, carrying a high spiritual price when the time comes for realistic awakening and disappointment. Many people end up abandoning the path of faith when their expectations of redemption are not fulfilled.

Our response to such an argument is that one cannot be a disciple of Rabbi Akiva by half measures. When the military and political rebellion led by Bar Kokhba failed, Rabbi Akiva persisted with full force in his fight for the spiritual independence of the nation. He gathered groups and taught Torah in defiance of Roman law, never heeding the advice of Pappus, son of Yehuda, who asked him, "Akiva, have you no fear of the law?" (*Berakhot* 61b). Even on the fateful day when he was sentenced to death for his activities and he he was taken to have his flesh torn with iron combs, Rabbi Akiva did not lose his faith. On the contrary, the failure of his political efforts and the terrible death that he suffered served only to increase his love of God, with the clear knowledge that not all of God's decrees can be understood by the human mind. In this respect, too, Rabbi Akiva was different from Iyov who, when beset with suffering, began to curse.

A person who decides to follow the path of realizing the hope and vision of Rabbi Akiva must also be able and willing to pay the price when the time comes, not to blame God, Heaven forefend, but to incease one’s love of Him. One must also know that the spiritual battle is not over, and that the true values for the sake of which the battle was waged remain valid. The hope for the revival of these values is proportional to one's faith in them during difficult times.