

"Tell His Righteousness to a Born Nation"

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Based on a sicha by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

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Permit me to indulge in some childhood memories, returning, in a somewhat personal vein, to the year 1948.

At that time, the declaration of the State of Israel filled hearts with terror and joy alike. I found myself, like every simple Jew, compelled to recite psalms. My attention was drawn to mizmor 22 - "To the Conductor, on the morning star, a psalm of David," a chapter associated by the Sages with times of crisis.

Reading this mizmor, the feeling of impending danger is undeniable - there is a palpable fear, accompanied by a sense of personal, existential crisis:

"My God, my God, why have You abandoned me? Far from my salvation are the words of my cry. My God, I call in the day, but You do not answer; at night, but I have no rest." (v. 2-3)

"Do not distance Yourself from me, for trouble is near, for there is no help; many bulls have surrounded me, mighty ones of the Bashan have ringed me. They have opened their mouths against me, a lion tearing and roaring. Like water I have been spilled, and all of my bones have been separated; my heart has been like wax, melting within my innards." (v. 12-15)

Further on, we have the explanation for this paralyzing terror:

"For curs have surrounded me; a community of evildoers has encircled me, like a lion at my hands and feet... they divide my garments among them, and on my clothing they cast lots." (v. 17-19)

Yet even in such a situation, where one feels encircled by innumerable predators, there is still room for hope.

However, beside this sense of peril and fear, leading to a cry for salvation and deliverance, there is also a second thread. This is the theme, perhaps more than the first, which rings in my ears when I remember that night, that time.

I wish to relate specifically to the final verse of the chapter:

"They will come and tell His righteousness to a born nation as He has made it." (v. 32)

It is this verse that so arouses my memory, so rings in my ears, in my heart - "a born nation as He has made it" ("am nolad asher asa").

In this verse, what righteousness is being described? Who will come and tell, and to whom? What is the meaning of "as He has made it"? In what sense it is appropriate here to speak of "a born nation"? I wish to concentrate specifically on two points:

1) What is "a born nation"?

2) Who tells, and to whom?

Concerning the first point, we can use the term "nolad" (born) in three different ways:

a) We can read it according to the simple meaning of the verse: "And now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt..." (Bereishit 48:5). Ya'akov blesses Efrayim and Menasheh, Yosef's sons who had been born previously.

b) We can read the term "born" in our verse as does Targum Yonatan: "who are destined to be born." This is in line with the meaning of the word in the famous saying (Tamid 32a), "Who is wise? One who sees the born" - now does it take any great wisdom to see that which was already born? No. The idea is rather: that which is destined to be born, i.e., one who foresees future consequences is wise.

c) There is a present-tense "born," a process which is coming into being and occurring right now.

At that time, over half a century ago, certainly I took our verse to refer, first and foremost, to the present-tense "born," to a nation just now finding itself on its feet, at this moment undergoing the birth process, experiencing the pangs of emerging nationhood, the pangs of history - "a nation being born." However, it now seems to me that we can speak not only of one understanding, but of three valid interpretations.

One who lives a generation or two after the event certainly can understand "a born nation" as "a nation then born." Indeed, we may say that there was not one birth but many. One birth of the nation occurred with the establishment of the State, but the original birth took place at the exodus from Egypt and the Convocation at Mount Sinai. Part of the task before us is to understand which new elements of nationhood were created with the State, and which elements were a return to the ancient reality - and also to integrate both these elements.

We cannot content ourselves with a one-dimensional relationship to the past. It is incumbent upon us to relate to the "born nation" on two other levels as well, not solely that of the historical retrospective.

As Jews, heirs to a heritage of faith, our obligation and aspiration is to live constantly with the sense of "a nation being born." There is a sort of perpetual Giving of the Torah, that "every day they shall be in your eyes as new" (cf. Rashi Shemot 19:1), a feeling of rebirth and renewal in national terms and also on the ideological level, which must be constant. "Every day they shall be in your eyes as new" - both as relates to thanksgiving and gratitude ("telling His righteousness" in our verse), and also as relates to the willingness to confront the unique challenges of each day. Times of birth - national or biological - bring out our hidden powers, a willingness to sacrifice, a fighting spirit, an ability to rise to challenges. This is the spirit that animated the "generation of 1948," a generation of leaders, and should animate us as well.

We must see ourselves not only as "a nation being born" throughout the generations, but also as "a nation to be born" in the sense of a future nation. We are obligated to have a feeling of destiny, of mission, of individual holiness and national holiness. If we discuss seeing the future in the context of faith, it is not in order to divine it, but in order to identify and bond with it. We must "come and tell His righteousness" to that "nation to be born" hidden within us, which is as yet unexpressed.

However, as regards this destiny, it is not enough that we talk about it; we must create it. And we must create it not only as a national, political, sovereign, civil entity, but as an entity the roots of which are indeed in Egypt and Sinai, in the Torah of the prophets, in the ideology of the Sages - a nation born with faith and values. We cannot merely stand on the side and observe how this "born nation" is brought into the world. We must bring it to birth, we must walk with it, we must shape it, and we must build it.

"They shall come and tell His righteousness to a born nation, as He has made it" - the true demand of this verse is to know how to relate to these three dimensions of time at once:

firstly, maintaining an awareness of and rootedness in the past;

secondly, living the present, with all of its agitation and growth;

thirdly, striving for the future and shaping it.

Our second question related to the telling: "They shall come and tell His righteousness to a born nation" - who will tell whom? In one sense, our verse resembles the mitzva of "and you shall tell it to your son" (Shemot 13:8), which refers to the Egyptian exodus. In the latter verse, those who experienced the exodus pass on the message to the coming generations. Similarly, "they shall come and tell His righteousness" can be understood to mean that the veterans will tell it to the "born nation," the generation of the continuation. The older generations are those who experienced history, each individual to a greater or lesser extent; they are the ones who saw the events at the time of the establishment of the State, they are the ones who can transmit the message of the righteousness of God.

But in another sense, those who "will come and tell" are those who will be born in the later on. In the midrash on our verse, the following appears:

"Rabbi Yudan says: The later generations 'shall come and tell His righteousness' which He performed for the earlier generations."

According to this explanation, those who "tell His righteousness," those who ensure that the story is understood not only as a tale of ancient history but as part of a living reality - these are not the first generations, but they are specifically the later generations. The later generations are the ones who will determine whether the framework which was created in its time remains vibrant, value-driven, and meaningful, or whether it becomes fossilized and hollow, an outer shell without inner content. It is this task that should animate us, the later generations, as we "tell His righteousness" in giving us the State of Israel.

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