



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Devarim

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

August 2, 2014

Devarim

Is Zionism Judaism?



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”

DEVARIM > Devarim > Is Zionism Judaism?

August 2, 2014

ABSTRACT

With yet another series of tragic losses of our young IDF soldiers protecting Jews, our concerns only deepen about the situation in Israel. Especially as we stand in the Nine Days, when we remember the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the Holy Temples.

If you have ever listened to a Friday sermon broadcast from a Gaza mosque, you have heard a rant against the West, against the Jews, but especially against Zionism.

But what exactly is Zionism? How is it different from Judaism? Indeed, is it different from Judaism?

Today is *Shabbat Chazon*, the “Shabbat of Vision,” preceding Tisha B’Av, the saddest day of the Jewish calendar. Today we read the Haftorah of Isaiah’s vision, penned some 2,750 years ago. And this is the last sentence we read: *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and its captives with righteousness.*

So, wait, is Zionism a new concept associated with the modern State of Israel, or is it thousands of years old?

Is only the State of Israel – the so-called “Zionist entity” – at war right now? Or is every single Jew at war?

Perhaps if we open the Jerusalem Talmud and study why it is that God calls the entire Jewish people Zion (*Tziyon*), we shall come to learn what it truly means to be Zionists (*Tziyonim*). And how being Zionists can help us win this war – so that we became *Metzuyanim*, a standout people that no nation or culture can ever subjugate.

All of the above is illustrated by a heartbreaking story of what it truly means to be a soldier in the Israeli Army.

IS ZIONISM JUDAISM?

1. Opening Prayer

There is a Yiddish expression that goes like this: *Eider ich gay reiden, vill ich zugen a par verter* – “Before I begin speaking, I would like to say a few words.”

These few words come in the form of a prayer:

May our brothers and sisters throughout the Land of Israel be protected and shielded from all harm that would befall them and from all who would destroy them.

May the soldiers of Israel, who stand and fight on the front lines for the peace and safety of the Holy Land, and who effectively fight on the front lines for the peace and safety of the entire world, accomplish their God-given mission.

May God, *whose divine eyes are constantly upon the Holy Land, from the beginning of the year¹ to the end of the year*, protect them all and shield them and keep them safe from all harm, from all suffering, and from all pain. Amen.

We trust that God, who gave us this Promised Land, will protect us from all who desire to destroy us. We trust that God will do His part to protect Israel. And God trusts that we will do our part to protect Israel, both the Holy Land of Israel and the holy people of Israel.

But what exactly is our part – those of us who live far away from the conflict, who are not on the front lines? What can we do?

This is our subject today.

¹Deuteronomy 11:12.

2. Generally Speaking (Joke)

By the way, the United States is very generous with military aid to Israel. The one catch is that whatever monies Israel receives, it must spend buying armaments and other equipment from America. This often brings US military personnel to Israel.

One day, General Marshall of the Joint Chief of Staffs of the United States Army was visiting with his counterpart, General Goldstein, the *Ramatkal* of the Israeli Defense Forces. Marshall arrived at the military base in the Negev and was greeted by Goldstein. As they walked around the place, Marshall asked: "So how are your men?"

"Very well trained, General."

"Well, I don't doubt that, but I doubt that they are as brave as my men in the United States Army."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that General," replied Goldstein. "My men are exceedingly brave, as well."

"I'd like to see that," said Marshall.

So Goldstein promptly beckoned over a soldier: "Private Mizrahi! I want you to stop that rumbling tank simply by standing in front of it!"

"*Mah? Ata meshugah?*" Private Mizrahi shouted back. "Are you crazy? It would be suicide! Why don't you stand in front of the tank? Are you some kind of fool? What kind of *Ramatkal* are you?"

Goldstein turned to Marshall: "See? You have to be pretty brave to talk like that to a general of the IDF!"

3. Israeli Chutzpah

Even in the darkest times – or maybe *especially* in the darkest times – we Jews never lose our ability to laugh. Even as we cry and mourn, there is a part of us that transcends this painful world and we connect to something deeper, something that allows us to appreciate life and remember that we are here to make this world a better place.

As the above joke illustrates, even a private in the Israeli army has no trouble standing up to a general. It's just the way Israelis are – and everyone knows it, especially the Israeli leadership.

A well-known story relates a conversation between Golda Meir, the then Prime Minister of Israel, and Harry Truman, the former U.S. President. Truman complained that it is very hard thing to be president of 200 million people. To which Golda retorted, “You should try being president of 2 million presidents.”

As any tourist who has ever visited the country can attest, everyone in Israel knows how best to run the country. Ever talk to a taxi driver? But it's not just taxi drivers – every single Israeli has a foolproof plan for Israel, one which he or she will share with you at a high octave whether you want to hear it or not.

The roots of this strong sense of independence are found in Zionism. But what exactly is Zionism, and how is it different from Judaism? Indeed, is it different from Judaism?

The progressive world out there would have you believe that there is a huge difference. In the Western World of the 21st Century, it isn't politically correct to be anti-Semitic, meaning anti-Jewish, but it's quite acceptable to be anti-Zionist. It is laudable to rant against “Zionist occupation” and “Zionist oppression.” It is even politically correct to equate Zionism with racism.

Jews tend to be liberal, and they tend to be politically correct. Therefore, Jews ought to know the difference – if any – between Zionism and Judaism. So let us look at the origins of Zionism and see if they differ at all from the origins of Judaism. Let us explore whether Jew and Zionist are two different things or one and the same.

4. The Origins of Zionism

Many people think that Zionism began with a man named Theodore Herzl, who dreamed of a Jewish homeland. Herzl's two influential books, which became foundations of the modern State of Israel,

are entitled *Der Judenstaat*, “*The Jewish State*,” and *Altneuland*, “*The Old New Land*.”

So did Herzl propose a new idea, or did he revive an old idea?

Well, a clue is contained in today’s Haftorah, which is taken from the Book of Isaiah penned some 2,750 years ago. This is what it says: *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and its captives with righteousness.*²

These words are part of the “Vision of Isaiah” which is always read on the Shabbat just prior to Tisha B’Av – when we mourn the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, first by the Babylonians and then by the Romans.

Isaiah’s prophetic vision (*Chazon Yeshayahu*) begins with a rather harsh rebuke – he tells the Jewish people and their leadership that they are not fulfilling their purpose on this earth and that God is not happy. (Rebuking our leadership, evidently, is a time-tested Jewish tradition. Bibi you are in good company.)

Then Isaiah’s words become gentler, beseeching the people to return to their natural state – to their essential soul, to their *pintele yid*, their seminal divine spark – by performing acts of justice and kindness towards the needy, orphans and widows.

Isaiah then promises the Jewish people that, if they do so, they will be forgiven – *If your sins prove to be like crimson, they will become white as snow; if they prove to be as red as crimson, they shall become [white] as wool. If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good of the land.*³

This visionary Haftorah concludes with a message of hope and aspiration: *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and its captives with righteousness.*

Nearly 3,000 years ago, the Prophet Isaiah – who is called Ishiya in Arabic, and who, incidentally, is considered a holy prophet by both Islam and Christianity – referred to Israel and its people by this word Zion. And we have read his prophetic words every Shabbat before Tisha B’Av for the past 2,000 years!

² Isaiah 1:27.

³ Isaiah 1:18-19.

5. More Proof

So let's face it, Zion is hardly a new concept.

But if you need more proof, the Book of Isaiah is not the first time Zion is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. The first to use that word was the Prophet Samuel who lived 300 years before Isaiah, and who writes about *the stronghold of Zion, which is the city of David*.⁴

The Prophet Samuel's burial spot is located in the suburbs of Jerusalem. So revered by Muslims is Samuel – called Samoel in Arabic – that they built a mosque atop his tomb. And he was the first to speak of Zion, a word which is found 157 times in the Hebrew Bible and more times than I can count in the Jewish prayer book. Indeed, for the past 2,000 years, ever since the destruction of the Second Temple, every single day, three times a day (four on Shabbat), Jews have prayed: *May our eyes behold Your return to Zion in mercy. Blessed are You Lord, who restores His Divine Presence to Zion*.

Consequently, unequivocally, without a shred of doubt, Zion and Zionism has been part and parcel of Judaism, as far back as King David. Any modern version of Zionism is founded on the essence of Zionism as it is defined in some of the oldest Jewish scriptures (which also Islam and Christianity respect).

The only question we have to answer – the million shekel question, if you will – is: What exactly is the relationship between Zionism and Judaism? How do they differ and in what way are they the same?

Perhaps using the words of Isaiah, the ones we just read in the Haftorah, can help us find the answer – *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and its captives with righteousness*. What is Zion? How was it lost? How shall it be redeemed? Who are its captives? And what is the righteousness that is needed for redemption?

⁴ II Samuel 5:7 and I Kings 8:1.

6. Defining Zion

Let's begin by defining Zion. What does this word mean?

Zion was the name of the stronghold fortress in the City of David (the original Jerusalem) and its Hebrew name *Tziyon* means "marker," a characteristic that makes something "stand out," a characteristic that makes something prominent.

If you are driving to a destination, looking for a specific place, a road marker will tell you that this is the location you are looking for. *Tziyon*, Zion, is such a marker.

Over time, the word Zion has come to refer to various things: Jerusalem,⁵ the Temple^{5 6} (specifically the Holy of Holies), the entire Land of Israel,⁷ and the Jewish people.⁸

How do we know that Zion refers also to the Jewish people? From another verse in the Book of Isaiah where the prophet quotes God:

*"And I placed My words into your mouth, and with the shadow of My hand I covered you, to plant the heavens and to found the earth and to say to Zion, you are My people."*⁹

This verse answers our question about the relationship between Judaism and Zionism and between the Jews and the Zionists.

*But you might be asking: What does it mean, And I placed My words into your mouth? What does it mean, And with the shadow of My hand I covered you? And what does it mean, Zion, you are My people?*⁹

Let's look into the Jerusalem Talmud, the Talmud *Yerushalmi*, for an explanation.

⁵ II Samuel *ibid*.

⁶ Psalms 72:2. To note: In the Byzantine era, a hill just south of the Old City of Jerusalem was erroneously identified as Mt. Zion, and that name stuck to it until today. As mentioned above, throughout scripture Mt. Zion is synonymous with Mt. Moriah, the site of the Temple.

⁷ E.g. Psalms 137:1-6.

⁸ Isaiah 51:16.

⁹ Isaiah 51:16.

7. Talmud Yerushalmi

Says the *Talmud Yerushalmi*:¹⁰

Shimon HaTzaddik, Shimon the Righteous, was among the last surviving members of the Great Assembly. He would say: “The world stands on three things: Torah, the service of God, and deeds of kindness. And the three of them are found in one verse: *And I placed My words into your mouth* – this refers to Torah. *And with the shadow of My hand I covered you* – this refers to deeds of kindness. ... *And to plant the heavens and to found the earth* – this refers to the offerings in service of God. *And to say to Zion, you are My people* – this refers to Israel.”

Said Rav Chinana ben Papa: “I searched throughout all of scripture and did not find that Israel is referred to as ‘Zion,’ but only in here: *And to say to Zion, you are My people.*”

When is Israel called Zion – a people who stand out? Only in this verse. For Torah, prayer and kind deeds create physical markers and signs (*tziyonim*) of the spiritual essence of who we, Israel, are.

The 18th century Jerusalem commentary, the *Karban Ha'eidah*,¹¹ puts this statement in a very appropriate light for our times, when Israel is attacked on the local front physically and on the international front ideologically:

By fulfilling these three mitzvahs, the Jewish people become outstanding/exemplary (*metzuyanim*) in the world, and as such no nation or culture will be able to rule over them.¹²

This is what it means to be Zionist – to be exemplary, *metzuyan*. Through our Torah, through our prayer service to our Creator, and through our deeds of kindness, we stand out, and the three pillars on which the world stand become secure.

¹⁰ Avot 1:2.

¹¹ Authored by Rabbi David ben Naphtali Frankel, c. 1704– April 4, 1762, Berlin.

¹² See also Likkutei Torah, Bamidbar 6a. Torah Ohr, Mikeitz 37b-c.

To be a Zionist then, to be marked as special and exceptional, is to have *My words [the words of Torah] into your mouth. [To be covered] by the shadow of My hand* which is a poetic reference to deeds of kindness. *And to plant the heavens and to found the earth* that is, to offer our prayers to God.

Through these three pillars we become recognized and outstanding. And then, God says, referring to Israel: *And [I] say to Zion, you are My people.*

8. Being Exceptional (Inspirational Story)

As I already said, the word in modern Hebrew for outstanding, or special, or exceptional, is *metzuyan*. And now let me share with you a heartbreaking, beautiful story told by an exceptional Israeli soldier – a story that drives home the point I have been trying to make in a very personal way.

One moment, Joseph Cabiliv was serving in the Golan Heights with several other soldiers; the next moment he was waking up in the Rambam Hospital in Haifa without his legs.

What had happened? As he and his unit were patrolling the Golan, Joseph's jeep had hit an old Syrian land mine. Two of his comrades were killed on the spot. Another three suffered serious injury. Joseph's legs were blown off.

Aside from the pain and disability, Joseph was confronted with society's incapacity to deal with the handicapped. "My friends would come to visit," he recalled, "sustain fifteen minutes of artificial cheer, and depart without once meeting my eye. My mother would come and cry, and it was I – who so desperately needed consolation – that had to do the consoling. My father would come and sit by my bedside in silence. And I don't know which was worse, my mother's tears or my father's silence.

“Returning to my civilian profession as a welder was, of course, impossible, and while people were quick to offer charity, no one had a job for a man without legs. When I ventured out in my wheelchair, people kept their distance, so that a large empty space opened up around me on the busiest street corner.”

When Joseph met with other disabled veterans he found that they all shared his experience, and many were embittered because of it. Then their attitude changed. What happened?

“In the summer of 1976,” Joseph recalled, “*Tzahal* – the Israeli Defense Force, the IDF – sponsored a tour of the United States for a large group of disabled veterans. While we were in New York, a Lubavitcher Chassid came to our hotel and suggested that we meet with the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Most of us did not know what to make of the invitation, but a few members of our group had heard about the Rebbe and convinced the rest of us to accept.

“As soon as they heard we were coming, the Chabadniks sprang into action, organizing the whole thing with the precision of a military campaign. Ten large commercial vans pulled up to our hotel to transport us and our wheelchairs to the Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn.

“Ten minutes after we were settled in, a white-bearded man of about 70 entered the room, followed by two secretaries. As if by a common signal, absolute silence descended on the room. There was no mistaking the authority he radiated. We had all stood in the presence of military commanders and prime ministers, but this was unlike anything we had ever encountered. This must have been what people felt in the presence of royalty. An identical thought passed through all our minds: Here walks a leader, a prince.

“He passed between us, resting his glance on each one of us and lifting his hand in greeting, and then seated himself opposite us. Again he looked at each of us in turn. From that terrible day on which I had woken without my legs in the Rambam Hospital, I have seen all sorts of things in the eyes of those who looked at me: pain, pity, revulsion, anger. But this was the first time in all those years that I encountered true empathy. With that glance that scarcely lasted a second and the faint smile on his lips, the Rebbe conveyed to me that he is with me – utterly and exclusively with me.

“The Rebbe then began to speak, after apologizing for his Ashkenazic-accented Hebrew. He spoke about our ‘disability,’ saying that he objected to the use of the term. ‘If a person has been deprived of a limb or a faculty,’ he told us, ‘this itself indicates that God has given him special powers to overcome the limitations this entails, and to surpass the achievements of ordinary people. You are not “disabled” or “handicapped,” but special and unique, as you possess potentials that the rest of us do not.

“‘I therefore suggest,’ he continued, adding with a smile – ‘of course it is none of my business, but Jews are famous for voicing opinions on matters that do not concern them – that you should no longer be called *nechei Yisrael* (“the disabled of Israel,” our designation in the IDF bureaucracy) but *metzuyanei Yisrael* (the special, the outstanding, the exemplary of Israel).’ He spoke for several minutes more, and everything he said – and more importantly, the way in which he said it – addressed what had been churning within me since my injury.

“In parting, he gave each of us a dollar bill, in order – he explained – that we give it to charity on his behalf, making us partners in the fulfillment of a mitzvah. He walked from wheelchair to wheelchair, shaking our hands, giving each a dollar, and adding a personal word or two. When my turn came, I saw his face up close and I felt like a child. He gazed deeply into my eyes, took my hand between his own, pressed it firmly, and said, ‘Thank you,’ with a slight nod of his head.

“I later learned that he had said something different to each one of us. To me he said ‘Thank you’ – somehow he sensed that that was exactly what I needed to hear. With those two words, the Rebbe erased all the bitterness and despair that had accumulated in my heart. I carried the Rebbe’s ‘Thank you’ back to Israel, and I carry it with me to this very day.”¹³

¹³ Originally published in the Hebrew weekly Sichat Hashavuah; translation/adaptation by Yanki Tauber here: [http://meaningfullife.com/oped/2002/05.23.02\\$Naso-COLON_Thank_You.php](http://meaningfullife.com/oped/2002/05.23.02$Naso-COLON_Thank_You.php).

9. The Message

The message is clear for every special soldier in the Israel Defense Forces fighting for his people, for those that have been injured, for those who have given up their lives *al kiddush Hashem*, and for their families, who are also our families. We do not know God's mysterious ways, but we do know that whatever happens, whatever losses we endure, whatever pain we experience, we are *metzuyanim*, we are extraordinary. We are never broken, though we may break ... we are never at a loss, though we may lose much ... we are never hopeless, though we cry a million tears. We are never disabled; we are always exceptional!

And this message also applies to all of us here today, and for all of Israel dispersed throughout the four corners of the world. Often times, especially when it comes to the Holy Land, which is so close to our hearts, we focus on our limitations, our handicaps, our disabilities. And this causes us to argue, to disagree, to focus on the problems. World opinion depresses us, makes us sad, angry, and causes us to question the very bedrock of our Israel – Zion – and its purpose.

Yes, we are human and we are imperfect, maybe challenged and limited and even “disabled” in certain areas – but this only means we are all *metzuyan*, exemplary and outstanding in other areas.

Metzuyan, whose root word is *Tziyon*, means we are special, extraordinary, and outstanding! We have something revolutionary and fundamental to give to this world. When we ignore this fact, we become weak, confused, and unsure. But when we focus on this fact – standing as Jews who are meant to be extraordinary standouts in this sometimes ordinary world – then no nation, culture, country or people can ever rule over us and put us down.

Some of us do this in the physical sense by serving in the Israeli army. But others of us, who cannot serve, can still do this by being the best exemplifiers of the extraordinary – by being the best Zionists we can be – in our communities, workplaces, and homes, wherever in the world we may dwell.

How do we accomplish this? Through the three pillars that hold up the world, as proclaimed by the *Talmud Yerushalmi* – through Torah, service of God and deeds of kindness. Because that is why we, Israel, are called Zion by the Creator of the World.

To be a Jew is to be outstanding and to show the world what outstanding means. To be a Jew is to be *metzuyan*. To be a Jew is to be a Zionist in the truest sense of the word – a lighthouse in a storm, a marker on a confusing path, a sign on the structure that is the universe.

Let's all be proud of bearing that name. Amen.

10. Practical Suggestions (Optional)

And now for some practical suggestions how to strengthen those three pillars by increasing what we normally do.

- 1) To increase in prayer: Immediately following regular prayers, say several extra chapters of *Tehillim*. Psalms 20, 22, and 69 are good suggestions.
- 2) To increase in Torah: After prayers (both after the morning and afternoon prayers) participate in daily study group. If you already do that, then extend your learning session and be sure to also study *halacha* (Jewish law).
- 3) To increase in acts of kindness: Before and after prayers give to charity (in addition to your regular donation). And consider in particular a cause in the Land of Israel.¹⁴

¹⁴ Based on a letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe – dated 5th of Tevet, 5736/December 9, 1975 (original printed in Likkutei Sichot vol. 15 p. 555-557); excerpt from the Talk of Shabbat Parshat Vayigash 5736 (original printed ibid p. 558-559). See translation here: [http://meaningfullife.com/oped/2014/07.17.14\\$MatotCOLON_What_Can_I_Do_About_the_Situation_in_IsraelQUESTION.php](http://meaningfullife.com/oped/2014/07.17.14$MatotCOLON_What_Can_I_Do_About_the_Situation_in_IsraelQUESTION.php).

11. God Is With Us (Optional Conclusion)

I have told this joke before, but forgive me, it bears retelling:

When word came to the people of earth that the world would be completely flooded in three days, the Christians gathered in their churches to pray, the Muslims gathered in their mosques to pray, and the Jews gathered in their synagogues and said, “Okay, we have a full three days to figure out how to live under water.”

This anecdote is not meant to bash anyone else, but to illustrate the pride of the Jewish People.

Just imagine if today’s demographics were reversed. Imagine if 1.8 million Jews lived in Gaza and 7 million Arabs lived in Israel. You know what would happen? The Jews of Gaza would turn that strip of 141 square miles into an oasis, into a center of cutting-edge technology, a hub of agriculture, an international standard of democracy, and, most of all, a vibrant hotbed and greenhouse of spirituality. That is what Jews would do.

And you know why? Because we are taught from day one to be *metzuyanim*, to be extraordinary, to be exemplary, to be standouts in everything we do, to be exceptional in every way we act, to be special, marked as holy, and to be an example for the rest of the world. That’s why!

We have been told for the past 3,000 years, ever since King David established his capital at the *stronghold of Zion* – that we have to be Zion, *Tziyon*, *Tziyonim*, *metzuyanim*, we have to stand out and be outstanding.

And when we are, the world will respect us. And when we are, the world will respect itself. And when we Jews are standouts, in every sense of the word, then all of humanity will be outstanding as well, physically, materially, and spiritually!

In this merit, and by the deeds of our proud actions, may the Third Temple be rebuilt immediately, may Tisha B'Av be turned into a day when God Almighty fulfills the prophetic words of Isaiah: *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and its captives with righteousness!*

As we began with a prayer for the safety and security of our brothers and sisters in Israel, let us conclude with one as well. And together, let us say Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!