

Korach 2014

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick, June 21, 2014

There are so many things going on in the world today, and so many important matters for the Jewish People that there are any number of topics we could address... But really, in Israel there is only one; one topic in the hearts and minds of all of Israel and that is the kidnapping of the three Jewish teenagers: Gilad Shaar, Naftali Frenkel and Ayal Yifrach. Israel's collective conscious is centered on these three teens and their families, and that is as it should be. It is so frightening to think of what might be happening to them right now, even as all of Israel looks for them and increases the efforts to get them back safely. Since last Thursday, Israelis of all walks of life are gathering to pray for them. Israeli government officials are increasing pressure on the Palestinian Authority and Hamas to force their hands as well. But, most importantly, the Israeli Army has mobilized and is searching every nook and cranny of the State of Israel and using all available intelligence to find clues to where they might be held, even if it is deep inside the Palestinian Territories.

And as I watched the reports from Israel I was struck by the images of the soldiers I saw. Some were wearing kippot while others were not. Some had lighter skin of Europeans, some had the dark skin of Africans. Some were clearly religious, while others did not look to be observant. But all of them were dedicated to the same task – finding three orthodox yeshiva students for the simple reason that they are Jews and fellow citizens of the State of Israel. It didn't matter religious or secular, or color of the skin; economics, politics, they had nothing to do with it. One People- One Mission – to help Jews. Today we take for granted that all Israeli Jews would stand up for one another and lay down their lives for one another, but that wasn't always a certainty. We need merely look at this week's Torah portion, Korach. Korach led a rebellion against Moses in the desert trying to turn the Jewish People against one another. On the surface he said, "All Israel is holy," but his motives were obvious: He wanted to foment rebellion at a time when the Jewish People were in disarray. They had just had the heard the heartbreaking news that they would not be the ones to enter the Promised Land. Moses had to help the People to see that even if they could not make it; their children would have a better life when they themselves made it to Israel. There they would be One People with one central mission – to build a Land for Jews. It was that messianic vision that galvanized the Jewish People then and for generations to come, and it was surely that same

messianic imagery that led to the development of the modern State of Israel. The Messianic Ideal has been our sermon topic over the last three Shabbatot, and it is the connection between messianism and Zionism that I'd like to highlight today.

Zionism as a political movement really gained steam under the guidance of Theodor Herzl, a secular Jew. His vision of a Jewish State was a safe haven for Jewish people who could protect themselves and legislate for themselves. He imagined that the Jewish State would be, by and large, a secular one for that would have the broadest appeal. But, on the other hand, there were prominent and vocal European religious leaders who were ardent Zionists, too. They believed that the Jewish State should have a Jewish character and that could only be had by adherence to Jewish Law. But all of the discussion was pretty much hypothetical until 100 years ago. It was almost exactly 100 years ago that World War One began and the British ultimately defeated the Ottoman Empire that had ruled Palestine for about 400 years. Toward the end of the war, in 1917 the British issued the famous Balfour Declaration that said: "His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object..." and with that, the hypothetical became real.

And so it was not too long before Jews gained a degree of independence under the British in Palestine. But, like Torah times, our People needed a leader who could bring all the Zionists together in common cause – someone who had the respect of both religious and secular Jews. Since Britain had a chief Rabbi, it was only natural that Palestine (soon to be Israel) would have one of its own, but who to choose? Within a short time the choice was obvious, the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, known to all as Rav Kook. It was not simply Rav Kook's scholarship that made him the obvious choice. In fact, there were Rabbis whose intellectual acumen seemed greater. Rav Kook was chosen because he fervently believed that secular Zionists had an equally important role to play in the dream of a Jewish State. Rather than seeing them as a threat to Jewish identity, Rav Kook saw the ingathering of Jewish People from all walks of life as the "Dawn of Our Redemption." In fact, he wrote that phrase – *Reshiet Smichat Geulataynoo*- the "Dawn of Our Redemption", into the prayer for the State of Israel even before Israel was founded. We still use that same phrase, and much of the same prayer, in our own Prayer for the State of Israel that we said just a few moments ago.

Rav Kook died in 1935. But, like Moses before him, he planted the messianic seeds of hope in the hearts of the Jews living in Palestine under the British, as well as in the hearts and minds of Jews world wide. After the Holocaust (which seemed to many Jews of Europe who came to Israel as *Gog U'Magog*, the messianic “War to End All Wars”) the messianic ideal of the ingathering of the exiles grew even stronger. There was in many early Zionist’s hearts and minds a strong and palpable messianic feeling. For some that messianic feeling was religious, for others it was more political, but there was a real sense that a new dawn was on the horizon for all Jews in the Land of Israel – and that all Jews were in it together. And so, for example in 1948, when the fiercest battles for independence were fought, it was secular Israelis living on the coast who came to the aid, and often lost their lives, trying to liberate Jerusalem, even though Jerusalem was almost entirely populated by Orthodox Jews.

And I thought about all of that as I watched these Israeli soldiers earlier in the week searching for the three lost, kidnapped teens. At that moment all of the infighting between the religious and the secular, between the Haredim and modern orthodox and Reform and Conservative Jews, the political Right and Left in Israel melted away, and I too had a bit of that messianic feeling: Israel really is the ingathering of the exiles and the Dawn of Our Redemption. We are the spiritual heirs of Moses and Rav Kook, not Korach and his cohort. And maybe that is the take away from this sad story that unfolds before our eyes: that when all is said and done we really are One People and if we will it, it is no dream. Maybe the message that hits home is one of religious tolerance. Not that “they” should be more tolerant of “us”, but that religious and spiritual tolerance starts with “me” – with “you” –with one individual who is unwilling to be judgmental – even for a moment. Maybe the messianic message of Israel as the Dawn of Our Redemption is that we bring the messiah one Jew at a time, and if “we” all want to be in this together, then “I” have to be in there, too. Maybe finger pointing and suspicion and *shrys* of *gevalt* need to stop with me. Think about that. Think about any and every time you painted a picture of certain kinds of Jews with only broad strokes. Think about that messianic, Zionist, Jewish ideal the next time you are tempted to stereotype and to compartmentalize and judge. At a certain level it does not matter what “they” think of “us”, it matters what “I” think of this individual and that one. We shouldn’t need a reminder like the kidnapping of three Israel teens to bring us together, but now that it

has happened let's grow from the experience and truly see Israel as the Dawn of Our Redemption even as we pray for their safe return.