



GEULAS YISRAEL

BY RABBI MOSHE TARAGIN
Ram, Yeshivat Har Etzion

How is the War Reshaping Jewish Identity?

The month of Marcheshvan has concluded. True to its name, it was one of the most bitter months in recent Jewish history. Despite the horrific tragedy we suffered, there are some very promising ripple effects which are redesigning Jewish identity, connection, spirit, and solidarity. These transformations are long-term and very difficult to chart or to predict. Yet, as the war in Israel enters its second month there are some encouraging signs that dramatic changes may be reshaping the Jewish world on many levels.

A RELIGIOUS RENAISSANCE?

One of the most iconic images of the past month has been of Jews, across the globe, tying tzitzit for Israeli soldiers. Presumably, most of these tzitzit are earmarked for chyalim who don't typically wear them. Evidently, even soldiers who don't maintain a classic halachic lifestyle feel better protected in battle with both a bullet proof vest and a mitzvah vest.

There is an old adage that there is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole, and unquestionably, any war, anywhere, elicits religious sensibilities. When faced with extreme danger or life-threatening experiences, people are always more likely to turn to faith or to belief in a higher power.

Hopefully though, the desire for tzitzit reflects a deeper process coursing through the general secular Israeli population, as it returns to traditionalism and to general religious values.

TZITZIT AND MOSHIACH

The surge in popularity of tzitzit during this war is extremely symbolic. The Chofetz Chaim sensed that the seismic shifts of the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries signaled entry into the "Ikvasa d'mashicha" or the preliminary stages of redemption. He remarked that this era will witness a resurgence of tzitzit interest. Interestingly, wearing tzitzit and living in Israel are two *holistic* mitzvot which aren't limited to a particular action or ma'aseh mitzvah. Merely living in the Land or dressing with tzitzit while conducting a normal routine fulfills the mitzvah. Israeli soldiers wearing tzitzit while defending our Land feels powerfully Messianic.

There is an additional ironic twist to the revival of tzitzit interest. In perek 8, Zecharya describes a Messianic era during which the nations of the world recognize Hashem and acknowledge our people as divine emissaries. Looking to encounter Hashem, they cling to the corners of our clothing, imploring us to carry them to Yerushalayim.

כה-אָמַר, ה' צָבָאוֹת, בְּיָמֵינוּ, אֲשֶׁר יִחְזִיקוּ
עֲשָׂרָה אֲנָשִׁים מְכַל לְשׁוֹנוֹת הַגּוֹיִם; וְהִחְזִיקוּ בְכַנֵּף אִישׁ
יְהוּדִי לְאֹמֶר, נִלְכָּה עִמָּכֶם--כִּי שְׂמֵעַנּוּ אֱלֹקִים עִמָּכֶם

Effectively, tzitzit serves as a universal lifeline for humanity, connecting them to Hashem.

Sadly, this prophecy has yet to surface as much of the world is still hostile to us and violently opposes our divine rights to Yerushalayim. But, like every prophecy, this vision will one day materialize. In the meantime, proudly wearing tzitzit during this battle between good and evil announces our abiding faith in our Jewish mission to save humanity from its own demons.

RENEWED JEWISH IDENTITY

Unfortunately, crisis and tragedy are corrosive to faith and to Jewish identity. For example, after the horrors of the Holocaust many Jews abandoned their faith and many disappeared into the larger society, either afraid or disillusioned.

It appears that, at least initially, this tragedy is strengthening Jewish identity. In the USA there is a palpable and heightened increase in Jewish pride, solidarity, and connection to Israel. Furthermore, Jews who previously were only marginally engaged in religious practice are beginning to light Shabbat candles, recite Shema or Tehillim, attend shul, and even purchase tefillin and mezuzot. There is a worldwide shortage of tefillin due to increased demand.

Why and how is this happening? It could be that Jews are so revulsed by the blood-thirstiness and moral degeneracy of our enemies that they are attracted to the light of our religion. Those who weren't able to *inherently* appreciate the dignity and nobility of being Jewish are finally appreciating Judaism by witnessing the moral depravity

of a godless life or the immorality of religions which paint G-d as angry and blood thirsty.

My Rebbe, Harav Amital, remarked that, during the Holocaust he and his fellow prisoners constantly reflected that, even if given the opportunity, they would never trade places with their Nazi murderers. The prospect of sinking to such revolting behavior was a worse fate than being victimized. Amidst the darkness which descended upon humanity last month, many are now better appreciating Judaism as the religion of life.

Alternatively, this revival of Jewish identity may reflect a larger metaphysical phenomenon. Hashem planted a primordial sense of belonging within each Jewish heart. For the past two centuries, religious upheaval, moral chaos, financial pressures, and cultural influences all muffled this inner voice but the echo of this voice was never extinguished. Now that our people are being spotlighted and attacked, this quiet murmur is being amplified.

Will the strengthening of Jewish identity last? Will this renewed Jewish identity serve as a springboard for broader religious revival and renewed faith and religious commitment? Is this one of the seismic events we are promised will occur to turn hearts back to Hashem? We certainly hope so.

SOME SHOUT VENOM, SOME EXTEND KINDNESS

We are appalled to witness the horrible ogre of antisemitism raising its ugly head. Jew-haters always wait silently in the wings, ready to join any and every antisemitic movement and to adopt whatever false antisemitic canard or trope weaponizes their genocidal hatred. It is sad to see brainwashed automatons foolishly and

ignorantly attending pro-rape and pro-torture rallies in support of sub-human barbarians. What is our response to half a million frenzied Jew haters screaming for blood in the streets of London?

One crucial response is to counter-rally and clearly present the voice of reason and the voice of moral sensibility, whether or not a deaf world cares to listen. Additionally, many Jews are heroically doing battle in the arena of public opinion, from the capitals of Europe to the hate filled accounts of social media.

However, most of our people, when not protesting, are quietly lending a hand to one another. The gemara in Yevamot identifies chesed as one of the primary ethnic markers of the Jewish people, and the swell of chesed over the past month certifies this assessment. The amount of kindness and volunteerism over the past month has once again proven why Hashem selected us. Obviously, this level of chesed will not last forever, but it has certainly made its impact felt on this earth and in heaven.

Some hate, some love. Some murder the life G-d delivers, and some reinforce it. Baruch Hashem we are on the right side of this equation.

CONNECTING WITH ISRAEL

Within the Jewish Orthodox world there have been two very different responses to the establishment of the State of Israel. Some read Messianic and redemptive meaning into the resurgence of Jewish sovereignty and to the ensuing success of the State of Israel. To them the state is a divinely delivered gift, which heralds the early stages of our redemption.

Others are more suspect about the

notion that a secular government and a secular citizenry are divine historical interventions. Redemption must be authored entirely by Hashem, and it must be packaged in classic religious wrapping.

Over the past 125 years, these two groups have remained divided over the ideological meaning of Israel. Over the past month, however, it appears that common ground is starting to emerge.

We all possess an instinctive connection to our people and to our Land which runs much deeper than ideology. Within every Jew, even those who don't view the state as redemptive, the war has elicited a visceral concern for our people who have gathered in their ancient homeland, after two thousand years of wandering and suffering. Regardless of ideological perspective there is a common sense that our people have returned to rewrite Jewish history.

This bridging of the Orthodox world around a common consensus is gradually unfolding, but will take many generations to fully evolve. It can't be measured solely in how many Charedim enlist but must be gauged in the cultural shifts occurring within the broader Orthodox world. The war has awakened a deep and soulful connection to our land and our people, a connection which loud ideological pronouncements cannot capture.

This tragedy is transforming us. We don't know why Hashem allowed this disaster to occur. We do know that He has a purpose and a reason. We hope that we continue to respond with faith, solidarity, and heroism.

■ כי אנו עמך ואתה אלוקינו