

Israel: Dreaming the Great Dreams

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Israel: Dreaming the Great Dreams

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of Israel's independence, we take pride in her incredible achievements; we worry about her many problems; we commit ourselves to her unfolding future. No country on earth has done so much for so many in so short a time--all in the face of implacable enemies who stop at nothing in their efforts to thwart her. We salute the people of Israel. We thank the Almighty for having given us the privilege of living at this special time.

For religious Zionists, Israel represents the first blossoms in the ultimate redemption. Israel is a culmination of centuries of Jewish prayers and dreams--and the tremendous efforts of Jewish men and women to create and build a Jewish State in the promised land. The religious dream is that the Jewish State be a model of Jewish religion in action, that it be imbued with a spirit of Godliness, love of Torah, dedication to justice and honesty. In short, the dream is that Israel will indeed be a light unto the nations in every way.

Sadly, we are still far off from realizing these religious dreams. The role of religion is mixed: there are those who identify themselves as being anti-religious; the large masses of Israeli Jews, though, have a strong religious traditionalism and observe at least some of the major mitzvot. There are idealistic religious Jews who help imbue the State with a positive Jewish spirit. Yet, the "religious establishment" often seems to be one of the greatest obstacles to true religious life in Israel. The rabbinic "leadership" has become increasingly extreme, bureaucratic and insensitive to the needs of the public.

During the past week, we learned with horror of a decision of the high rabbinic court to annul conversions performed by Israel's own conversion authority! Aside from the halakhic impropriety of such a decision, it reflects a shocking callousness toward the feelings of thousands of converts and their families, and a frightening disregard for the needs of the Jewish State itself. The Chief Rabbi in charge of conversions has claimed that he opposes the court's decision. The rabbinic community is embroiled in a disgraceful controversy that serves to lower public respect for them and for the Torah they claim to uphold. Wither is fled the

visionary gleam, where is it now the glory and the dream.

In this week's Torah portion, we read: "And you shall count for yourself (usfartem lakhem--plural)" seven weeks of the Omer. In next week's Torah portion, we read: "And you shall count for yourself (vesafarta lekha--singular)" seven Sabbath years. Why is the plural used when counting the weeks, and the singular used when counting years. An answer: the commandment to count seven weeks is addressed to the public at large. The Torah assumes that people can keep focused on a mitzvah for seven weeks. However, when it comes to counting years for the sabbatical cycle, the Torah addresses itself to the sages of the great court--to individuals, not to the public at large. Most people cannot stay focused for such a long span of time as a fifty year cycle. This commandment was aimed at those specially gifted individuals who are so wise and so visionary that they can think ahead and plan for the fifty year cycles.

It is understood that not everyone can dream great dreams, can stay clearly focused on the long span of the future. Yet, that is exactly what religious leadership is called upon to do. I would suggest that this is what every Jew is expected to aspire to do--even if it is known in advance that most of us will fall short.

Religious leadership needs to be in the hands of those who are great dreamers and visionaries, those who see the long view of Jewish history and destiny, those who are tirelessly committed to serving God and humanity with love, kindness, compassion, wisdom. Religious "leaders" who do not fit this model are doing an injustice to Torah and to the people of Israel, and are desecrating the name of God by desecrating the grandeur of the Torah's great teachings.

As we celebrate Israel's 60th anniversary, we pray that the Almighty will bless Israel with all good things for many years to come--including a wiser, more loving and compassionate religious leadership. We need to reestablish the religious dream of a righteous Israel, a light unto the nations.