Yom HaAtsmaut: To bless Hallel or not to bless...the larger question: blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Submitted by mdangel1 on Sun, 03/01/2020 - 00:00

Shortly after his election as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel in the early 1970s, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef visited New York City and spent Yom haAtsmaut here. He gave a shiur for rabbis, held at Congregation Shearith Israel; and he gave a shiur for students at Yeshiva University. I attended both…and I was distressed.

Both of these shiurim were on the same topic: is it permissible according to halakha to recite Hallel with a blessing on Yom haAtsmaut, Israel’s Independence Day? Rabbi Yosef gave a very learned discourse, peppered with numerous references to halakhic sources. He demonstrated the phenomenal range of his halakhic knowledge and his remarkable skill as a public speaker.

His conclusion: it is not permissible to say Hallel with a blessing on Yom haAtsmaut. Moreover, it is preferable not to recite Hallel in the normal place after the Amidah, but rather one may add psalms of Hallel at the end of services. If congregations already had the practice of reciting Hallel with a blessing, they should refrain from reciting the blessing. If they had the practice of chanting Hallel in its usual place (after the Amidah), they need not change...although it would be desirable for them to do so. (For a full discussion of Rabbi Yosef’s views on Hallel on Yom haAtsmaut, please see Rabbi Binyamin Lau’s book, *Mimaran ad Maran*, pp. 163f.)

So on his auspicious and highly publicized visit to New York, the Chief Rabbi of Israel chose to speak in a way that diminished the religious significance of the Jewish State. With so many other topics of great importance to our diaspora communities, he chose rather to offer a technical shiur on why we should not recite Hallel with a blessing in observance of Israel’s Independence Day.

The Chief Rabbi of Israel—instead of highlighting the religious significance of Medinat Yisrael and deepening our love of Israel—diminished its religious significance.
As a young rabbi who viewed the establishment of the Jewish State as a monumental event in Jewish history, I was deeply distressed by Rabbi Yosef’s shiurim. His lectures were surely very learned…but—to use an analogy—they focused on the trees and didn’t see the forest. It was as though halakha is a self-enclosed system of arguments and counter-arguments, that doesn’t open its eyes to see new realities.

How very different was the approach of Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel, who served as the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1939 until his death in 1953. Rabbi Uziel’s student, Rabbi Abraham Shalem, cites the words of his teacher: “This day (Yom haAtsmaut) is a festival day for [the people of] Israel residing in the land and all the places of the dispersion, for our generation and for all generations to come—to praise God’s compassion, to announce in a voice of singing, happiness and praise: this is the day that the Lord has made, let us celebrate and rejoice on it.”

Rabbi Shalem, following the teachings of Rabbi Uziel, taught that “it is our great obligation to praise and thank the Rock of Israel and its Redeemer for His miracles and wonders that He performed for us and our children in our holy land. All who belittle and cast aspersions on the might and salvation of the Creator of the universe, Rock and Redeemer of Israel, behold they repudiate His goodness and mercy…It is a mitzvah to read Hallel in public with a blessing on Yom haAtsmaut, the day of the first blossoming of our redemption and freedom of our souls in the land of our ancestors.” (R. Abraham Shalem, Eshed haNehalim, vol. 2, p. 20).

Rabbis Uziel, Shalem and Yosef all relied on the same halakhic sources…and yet came to very different conclusions. Perhaps we can see this debate as a difference in religious vision.

For Rabbi Yosef, religious questions and answers essentially are technical halakhic matters. The halakhic system includes a vast number of texts, and the posek is obliged to study the texts, evaluate them, decide which texts are applicable to any given situation. One’s eyes are focused on the “four cubits of halakha”…which contain all the information we need.

For Rabbis Uziel and Shalem, halakha is not a closed system of texts and authoritative sources. The posek surely must know the texts; but the posek must also open his eyes to the outside realities. The establishment of the State of Israel, after nearly 1900 years of exile for the Jewish People, is a historical and halakhic novum. Given this amazing new reality, we naturally want to pour out our hearts with a meaningful and joyful religious response. Our religious souls want to recite Hallel, with a blessing, in joyful recognition and appreciation of God’s providence. Not to recite Hallel with a blessing would seem to be a sign of blatant ingratitude to God.
The question about saying Hallel with a blessing on Yom haAtsmaut has much broader implications. Is halakha a closed system that operates solely within its four cubits? Or is halakha a system of life that responds in a living way to the realities of our lives?

I recite Hallel with a blessing on Yom haAtsmaut. I am grateful to Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Shalem (my own rabbi when I was a teenager growing up in Seattle) for leading the way, for sharing their vision of Israel, of halakha, and of service to the Almighty.

- Log in or register to post comments