

The State, the People and the Promise

By Seth Cohen

The State of Israel. It is a passion, a project, and perhaps more than anything else, it is a promise. Not only a promise that has been kept, it also a promise that we are all challenged to keep. Regardless of whether you live there or here (and where you are reading this will define your own personal ‘there’ and ‘here’) it is likely that the passion one has for the vitality of the State of Israel is equaled only in magnitude by the intensity of the opinion one has have about what the State represents.

Notwithstanding the fact that our collective unity of passion that is balanced by our collective diversity of opinion, each *Shabbos* morning we find a common voice to pray for the welfare of the State of Israel. In that common voice, we pray for leadership, strength and protection of the State and its leaders, but curiously enough, we also pray for something else. In addition to our prayers for the “State” of Israel, we also say a prayer for the “Family” of Israel when, we pray:

V'es achaynu kol bays yisroayl pkod no b'chol artzos p'zuray-hem v'solichaym m'hayro kom'miyus l'tzion irecho v'lirusholayim mishkan sh'mecho. “And visit all of Brethren of the house of Israel, in all the lands where they are scattered, and bring them rapidly to Zion, Your city and to Jerusalem, where you name lives.

There is significance in this recital, because it demonstrates that even at the center of a prayer for the State, we include a prayer for the People. The State and the People are intertwined in liturgy just as they are in life, and this portion of text from our siddur helps beg the imperative as much as the question – just as we must be mindful of the State and the People in the same breathes of our prayers, we must continue to be mindful of the challenges and opportunities we face in strengthening and binding the relationship between the People of Israel and the State of Israel.

And out of that mindfulness comes two critical questions.

First, in this era when so many Jews view the State as a much-maligned governmental entity rather than an embodiment of the promise of the Jewish people, how do we engage

the State in a way that strengthens the aspirations (spiritual, cultural or otherwise) of the People? And second, how do we create such engagement between the State and the People when we are still striving to understand the concept of Jewish Peoplehood and the modern contours of the Jewish People?

In an effort to answer these two questions, I suggest we first more closely examine the way we understand the concept of the State of Israel and I propose we dispense with the view of it as a sovereign and structured political entity and approach it more as conception of governmentality maintained for a much higher purpose. Accordingly, I suggest that one useful analysis is the formulation the role of government (and the concept of governmentality) as articulated by the French philosopher Michael Foucault – who wrote:

“[W]hereas the end of sovereignty is internal to itself and possess its own intrinsic instruments in the shape of its laws, the finality of government resides in the things it manages and in the pursuit of the perfection and intensification of the processes it directs, and the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics.”

Informing our framing the role of the State of Israel with respect to the engagement of the People by using Foucault’s observations as an aid, the first question to ask is: what are the essential matters that the State manages and the processes it directs? And accordingly, what are the multiform tactics that it can use in perfecting such processes? On a very basic level, we must acknowledge that the State of Israel does such things that other states do – it provides for the common defense, administers a system of laws and justice that protects property, life and liberty. It also gives its citizens equal opportunities to voice pride and complaint with respect to the policies maintained by the government. But if that were all that we expected from the State of Israel, these simple instruments of sovereignty – military power, laws, and electoral mechanics, the State of Israel would be no different than any other nation-state with such similar instruments.

And we hold, collectively, that the State of Israel is different than other states. We assign to it a different role and a different standard of conduct. Don’t we?

Yes, we the Jewish People expect more from our State than any other nation-state. We expect the processes that it helps direct include no less than processes that support the

strengthening and the survival of the Jewish People. We expect that the processes and actions of the State embody Jewish ideals and the earthly manifestation of Jewish values. We expect that the Jewish State persevere as a homeland to those individuals who do not yet physically call Israel home, but nonetheless articulate a sense of ownership as if they lived there and never left. It is a place of rescue and a conception of Jewish strength.

It is in light of the aspirations that the People harbor for the State of Israel, and the processes that the State must perfect to achieve these aspirations, in which we must frame the relationship between the State of Israel and the Jewish people. We must more thoroughly examine the ways these processes can be perfected and the role of the People (in the broadest sense of the word) in enabling such perfection. And I submit that the search for perfection cannot be achieved merely by evaluating and improving the classical instruments of sovereignty. The tactics exercised by the State must be more than the tools currently at the State's disposal, but must be re-imagined to become multiform in nature. And the People must serve as engaged, educated and empowered instruments in the ever-perfecting aspects of the State's manifestation as an embodiment of the People.

So how do we re-imagine these multiform tactics? We must first create a more enduring framework in which the People who are in the Diaspora engage in ongoing cultural and spiritual dialogue with the People in *Eretz Yisrael*. We must harness technology to create new avenues of dialogue that infuse the institutions of the State with the experiences of its People. We must transcend the often-tenuous debate between the State and the “organized Jewish community” in the United States and focus on ways that the “unorganized” elements of the Jewish world can interact with the State in diverse and colorful ways.

We must much more frequently bring together great consortiums of Jewish people – thinkers, artists, scientists, theologians and activists, under the auspices of initiatives of the State so that the State itself, as an embodiment of its People, takes a role in the binding of those same People together. And lastly, we must find a way that the pluralism of spiritual identities that is so firmly rooted in each corner of the Diaspora also takes root in *Eretz Yisrael*, so that those voices are emboldened and the State, through its ministrations of that which it is sovereign, takes note of those voices and governs accordingly.

There is much to do in both realizing the promise of the Jewish State and enabling its instruments (the People) in that endeavor, and we must embolden the State to do so. Such

emboldening includes the new forms of relationship between the State and its People – as well as reframing the expectations they have for one another and the manner of investment which can help meet and exceed those expectations. However, as I referenced earlier, there is a second question that must be examined with equal intensity is how we can bind the State and the People closer together when we still struggle to define what that the essence of Jewish Peoplehood really is?

Perhaps, the answer to this section question lies at the heart of the answer to the first questions. Previously I have posited that the meaning of Jewish Peoplehood is best understood within the context of the collective journeying of the Jewish People. In many ways, the State is no different. Viewed as an embodiment of Jewish journeying, the State is a form of mass transit of the Jewish People – envisioned by Jewish passion, built by Jewish ingenuity and defended by Jewish blood. In its process of self-perfection and its journey of self-discovery, the State is on a journey forward towards its ultimate Jewish purpose – just like the Jews that individually (and collectively) journey forward into their own individual Jewish futures.

Perhaps, rather than struggling with the question of defining Peoplehood is as precedent to understanding the People's relationship with the State, we should more specifically simply posit that the State is a key vehicle in developing a greater understanding of journeying of the Jewish people in these modern times. Following this recognition, we then can place greater emphasis on the State, as an organic entity that is a form of mass Jewish journeying, can be a leader in creating individualized and collective pathways of Jewish journeying – which ultimately enhances Jewish Peoplehood.

So back to our prayer... when we pray for the State of Israel we must recognize that within that prayer we voice an aspiration as well as an imperative – that while the State must be safe and secure, our prayer for the State cannot be fulfilled unless the family of Jewish People are brought closer to it, to both strengthen the State and be strengthened by it. Because in the end (just as in its beginning), the Jewish State is more than a nation state, and it is more than our collective project. It is the embodiment of the promise of its People, wherever they may be. The State, the People and the Promise are inextricably linked and undeniably important. Each helps solve the riddles of the other two, and together they give shape to our collective purpose. Each requires new ways of engagement

and understanding, dialogue and decision. But most of all, each requires that we believe in its respective importance to the future of Jewish life – because that future is the sum of all three combined.

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