

The Rise of Modern Zionism April 26, 2012

Today is Yom HaAtzma'ut, or Israel Independence Day, which is always celebrated on the 5th of Iyar on the Hebrew calendar. It began at sunset yesterday and ends at sunset today. I thought I would do a teaching on the rise of modern Zionism, since the foundation of the state of Israel was its principle objective.

Our people have been exiled from their land twice since we first entered it as a people under the leadership of Joshua, the successor to Moses. The first time lasted some 70 years and so much of what the prophets had to say related to that first diaspora, but wherever our people have wandered, we have never forgotten our land (Psalm 137).

There were two events which were prophesied during the exile and the return. The first was the return and numerous passages spoke of the reestablishment of Israel in our land in such a way that we would never be removed any more (Amos 9:15; Joel 3:20; Is. 62:6-9; Jer. 32:36-44; 23:3, 4 among others). The second was the arrival of the Day of the L-rd which was portrayed in various ways by various prophets (Jer. 23:5; Is. 11:10; Joel 2:28-32; Micah 5:18-20).

In some people's understanding, the two events were to be simultaneous – that is the return to Zion was to usher in the messianic reign of G-d over all the generations and nations of mankind. This is both wrong and right, but the two events must not be confused. His dealings with the great nation will always parallel His dealings with all nations.

When our people rebelled against Rome and the temple was destroyed for a second time, a new set of prophecies was given about the events which would signal the end of this second diaspora and the establishment of the long awaited messianic kingdom of G-d (Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 21:20-24; Rom. 11:25, 26).

To confuse the prophecies about the first return with the second is probably one of the greatest theological mistakes most modern commentators on the End Times have made. Our people went into a second (unnecessary) captivity because of their blindness to the timing and greater purposes of G-d (Gen. 12:2, 3 especially).

A segment of our people began to carry to Gospel to the nations and their disciples have been doing so with varying degrees of success and credibility since the command was first given (Matt. 28:19, 20).

It was said that when Israel finally came back to her land, the end would be near and the rise of modern Zionism is part of the fulfillment of that series of prophecies.

I want to deal with this rise in two parts. I first want to talk about the rise of the false messiahs and the change in the Jewish understanding of the Messiah, and then I want to talk about the shift away from waiting for the messiah, to returning to the land.

The False Messiahs

The Book of Daniel gives a timeline from when it was written until the advent of the Messiah and it talks also about the process through which His kingdom would take over the world (Dan. 2:31-35). When Messiah did come on time, but did not bring the kingdom over all the nations and generations of mankind, many Jewish people began to do what many Christians are doing in our times – they looked for a hidden or alternate meaning for prophetic passages.

So that the longer time it was taking for the kingdom to be established could be supposedly explained by doing some fancy little numbers juggling (gematriya) and usually those who did this made sure that the final period of time their supposed calculations was referring, ended up with the kingdom coming in their days and in their lifetime and in all the lifetime of the House of Israel. Things haven't changed much.

Jewish people gradually began to believe that there were two messiahs: Ben Joseph, the suffering one and Ben David the glorious king. They developed the idea of two messiahs who each came once, instead of seeing the truth of the Bible which speaks of one Messiah who comes twice.

Let me tell you about some of the false Messiahs:

1. Bar Kokhba
2. Abulafia
3. Isaac Luria (and later Baal Shem Tov)
4. David Reuveni
5. Sabbatai Zevi (Mordecai Mokia, Jacob Joseph Frank)
6. Menachem Schneerson (I have downloaded some Wikipedia notes onto a file which I will send to anyone who asks for it)

After Sabbatai Zevi, many Jewish people felt that instead of waiting for Messiah to take them home, they should go home and wait for Him there. This began to build momentum among Jewish communities towards the end of the 1600's and in various strands and in various forms is the beginning of the modern Zionism movement.

About this time, there was also a rise in anti-Semitism, possibly due to the way in which the Jewish population of Europe and the Middle East finally began to recover from the Crusades and the Inquisition. The rise in pogroms (persecutions) coincided with the rise in a desire for Jewish people to stop being kicked about among the nations and to return home to the only place they have ever belonged – Israel (Zion).

In the nineteenth century, conferences were held and the World Zionist Organization (HaHistadrut HaTzionit HaOlamit or WZO, which became the Zionist Organization or HaHistadrut HaTzionit or ZO) came into being in Basel, Switzerland in 1897 (in 1960, it changed its name to the World Zionist Organization).

At the same time as the World Zionist federation was being formed, the 19 century saw a series of vicious pogroms in Eastern Europe and the first large numbers of settlers began to arrive in Israel in three waves (or Aliyahs).

Prior to this, the Holy Land had a few isolated communities of mainly religious Jews scattered between several urban centers. The countryside of the Holy land had degenerated into scattered villages of impoverished Arabs scraping out a living under a heavy burden of taxation from absentee landlords and their Turkish masters.

When the Jewish settlers began to arrive, the Arab population of the Holy Land increased as there was work available in an economy that was beginning to thrive for the first time in centuries. Land was bought and the pioneers began to develop agricultural techniques geared to the Holy Land and though Turkish rule was harsh, the land was peaceful and there were no limits placed on Jewish immigration or land acquisition.

With the advent of World War I, the Europeans turned their attention to Middle Eastern oil and carved up the old Turkish Empire between England and France, ignoring both Arab and Jewish political aspirations. To placate the growing Arab hostility towards the growing Jewish population, limits were placed on immigration and a three way guerrilla war developed between the British and the Jews and the Arabs.

World War II saw the destruction of most of European Jewry and when an exhausted Britain could no longer govern the Holy Land, Palestine was divided between Palestine Trans-Jordan, the intended Arab section and Palestine proper, the intended Jewish portion. When the United Nations divided this land between the Arabs and the Jews, the Jewish portion declared independence 64 years ago today.

The term Palestine changed its mean from a geographic designation and began to be used to refer to the Arab inhabitants of this region and despite an almost endless series of wars, Jewish immigration to what is now called Israel has meant that for the first time since the destruction of the second temple, Israel has the largest Jewish population in the world (followed by the US, the former Soviet Union, France, Britain and now Germany).

One of the biggest challenges for Zionism today is Jewish emigration from the Holy land, followed by the rise of anti-Semitism under the guise of anti-Zionism. The land continues to be redeemed so that it can be returned to the garden it once was before the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Israel's economy also keeps developing and the state is increasingly becoming the leading voice of world Jewry.

Zionism is defined as a belief in the right for Jewish people to return to the Holy Land and establish a Jewish state within the borders of the ancient Holy Land. Zionism has never had any designs on either Arab land or Arab sovereignty and continues to work towards peaceful cooperation with all of Israel's neighbours, as well as striving to protect the rights of all of her minorities. Zionism takes a stand against all forms of racism and human rights abuses wherever they occur and whoever they target.