The Land of Israel or the State of Israel?

THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Jerusalem was not always the vibrant capital of the Jewish state that we know today. For centuries, the few Yehudim who managed to reach the Land of Israel were merely a defenseless minority, without sovereignty, living under the rule of foreign powers. Visiting Jerusalem was an act of faith, and seeing the ruins of the city, not only the Temple (*Bet HaMiqdash*), caused such profound pain that our Sages decreed that one must tear their garments as a sign of mourning.

I think of Yehuda HaLevi, the great 12th-century poet and philosopher who tragically died at the gates of Jerusalem while reciting his poem *Tzion Halo Tishali*. Or Maimonides, who, upon arriving in Israel in the 12th century, visited Hebron but could not even step foot in Jerusalem due to the bloody Crusades between Christians and Muslims. For more than 1,800 years, the Jewish presence in Jerusalem was insignificant and constantly threatened. We had no army, no government, no authority. We were either persecuted or, at best, tolerated, depending on the whims of the ruling powers.

RELIGION OR NATION?

In his reasoning about tearing garments in contemporary times (something that we Sephardim still do), Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook z”l explains his argument based on an interpretation of the *Bet Yosef*. He asserts that mourning is not solely dependent on the existence or non-existence of the Temple but also on who governs Israel and Jerusalem. If the city is under foreign rule, then yes, we must mourn our loss. But since 1967, Jerusalem has been in our hands, rebuilt day by day. Jerusalem is no longer just part of the Land of Israel; it is the

capital of the State of Israel.

This distinction between “Land” and “State” is fundamental to understanding Purim. In the time of Mordechai and Esther, about 50,000 Jews lived in Jerusalem and its surroundings, and the *Bet HaMiqdash* was built and functioning! This was thanks to a decree by the Persian emperor Cyrus in 516 BCE, which declared religious freedom for the Jews and allowed the construction of the Temple. But the Jews were subjects of the Persian Empire. They had no sovereignty or army of their own, and after the death of Cyrus, they were not even able to obtain imperial permission to build the protective walls of the Temple—something that Nehemiah achieved with the son of Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes. Without sovereignty, any imperial decree could seal the fate of the Jewish people, as would have happened with Haman’s decree, which would have led to the extermination of the Jews in the “Land” of Israel as well.

WE DON’T REALIZE HOW GOOD WE HAVE IT

Today, thanks to God, Land and State coincide. We no longer depend on the favor of foreign kings or rulers. We protect ourselves heroically with the help of Bore Olam and with our own army. We build and rebuild our cities, ensuring that no modern-day Haman can determine our fate. God performed miracles on Purim through Mordechai and Esther. Today, His Providence is manifested through the soldiers who protect the existence of *Medinat Israel*.

To better understand the contemporary significance of this concept, we only need to briefly explore the Muslim perspective on the State vs. the Land of Israel. The more moderate Arabs—those who are not jihadists—insist that Jews may live in the Land of Israel, but they must not have a State! According to them, Jews could reside in the Holy Land as a protected minority, paying a special tax (*jizya*), but without sovereignty or their own army. In other words, depending on the goodwill of those in power. Essentially, they

would be willing to grant us the right to exist and even to practice our religion and perhaps have our *Bet HaMiqdash*—in a location to be determined—but not the right to self-determination. That is, it would repeat the same scenario we experienced during the Persian Empire and for centuries in Muslim countries: we would be at the mercy of the rulers of the time.

THE TRAP OF INGRATITUDE

This is why, every time a Jew speaks of the "Land of Israel" and omits mentioning the "State of Israel," they are unintentionally reinforcing this Arab narrative. Some may not be satisfied with the Jewish state because it is not yet religious enough, etc. But by denying the idea of the Jewish State and repeating this exilic mindset, one would be acting—perhaps unknowingly—in a disgraceful way toward Bore Olam, who has granted us this immense privilege.

In the Messianic era, according to Maimonides, the first step will be the restoration of Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel, under the leadership of the *Melekh HaMashiach*, a sovereign King (*Melekh*) whom the Jewish people anoint (*Mashiach*), and who has not been appointed by non-Jews. Every time we affirm that we have a State of Israel, we also declare that our Messianic aspirations are drawing ever closer.

The lesson of Purim is clear: without our own State, without our own defense, Jews will always be in danger. It doesn't matter how free we are to practice our religion, and it doesn't even matter if we are in Israel or in the diaspora—if we don't have a State, there will always be a Haman ready to find us defenseless.

Today, all Yehudim around the world are, virtually, citizens of Israel. The miracle of *Medinat Israel* is happening before our very eyes. We only need to open them to see it.