



## GEULAS YISRAEL

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# Judaism is Like an Onion, Layers and Layers

The Midrash records a conversation between Moshe and Hashem regarding His unending love and persistent interest in the Jewish people. Constantly receiving commandments directed solely for the Jewish people, Moshe wonders what could possibly warrant this “preoccupation” with our nation. Hashem’s response to Moshe is intriguing. You may have expected Hashem to cite our heroic faith in blindly following Him into a barren desert. After all, Yirmiyahu highlights this courage and dedication is his famous verse *זכרתי לך חסד נעורייך...לכתך אחרי במדבר*

Similarly our historic pledge of *נעשה ונשמע*, taken at the foot of Har Sinai might also justify Hashem’s unremitting affection. Surprisingly, in this Midrash, Hashem mentions a very simple and common declaration of *ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד* proclaimed at the conclusion of *Shirat Hayam*. Somehow, this succinct and unadorned announcement warrants our special divine affection.

For the first two and a half millennia of history, humanity was adrift in moral disorder and theological chaos. Though isolated individuals had discovered a one G-d possessing moral spirit, most of humanity was

still trapped in a lawless world of violence and voodoo. Finally, one nation identified Hashem, declared his sovereignty and brought His presence down into this world. Having been liberated from Egypt and having witnessed colossal miracles at the sea, the Jews saluted *ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד*. That momentous declaration would never be “forgotten” by Hashem.

It would also never be forgotten by Jews. This declaration is a major milestone on the road to Jewish identity. Jewish identity is never “all-or-nothing” but contains layers. These “layers” of Jewish identity were carefully compiled during the fateful seven weeks between the initial Exodus and the events of Sinai. Imagine a timeline of Jewish identity which begins on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Nissan, stretches through the 21<sup>st</sup> of Nissan—the day of the ocean crossing—and culminates on the 6<sup>th</sup> of Sivan when the Torah was delivered. On each day an important element of Jewish identity was distilled.

On the day we left Egypt we coalesced into a nation. The night before, we experienced our first national ceremony of Jewish identity. Gathering in our shuttered homes, in a faraway land, we celebrated the first Pesach seder, and were quickly hustled out of bondage. That seminal experience, forever etched in Jewish consciousness, has been annually reenacted for centuries. On the day of 15 Nissan, Jewish national identity was founded upon an enduring sense of shared heritage

and of historical mission.

Seven days later a frightened and panicked nation was corned between the rampaging Egyptian chariots and a roaring ocean. After successfully crossing through a dry seabed and watching their former abusers drown, we gleefully embraced divine authority. Having already become a nation of history and heritage, we now transitioned into the nation of G-d, announcing His presence to an unruly world.

Six weeks later we arrived at the mountain and embraced religious practice and the study of Torah. Judaism isn't built solely upon national identity and religious belief. It demands applying divine Will to our daily routine and to our general behavior. Furthermore, the study of Torah is not just relegated to the "clergy", but is incumbent upon, and available to all. Full Jewish identity is a distillation of these three components - launched on three days of glory. A full Jew proudly senses a national and historical belonging, accepts divine authority and translates that acceptance into Torah commitment.

Sadly, the ravages of history and the weakness of the human spirit have caused many Jews to retreat from "the mountain" and to abandon classic halachic behavior. Yet, amongst those who have retreated from Sinai, there are millions who still stand at the banks of the ocean exclaiming ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד, affirming Hashem's presence and authority in our world. Judaism isn't an all-or-nothing proposition. Though this type of Jew exists world-wide, they are especially common in Israel. Often called "Masorati", they deeply believe in Hashem and accept his authority. Unfortunately— in part because of the seismic geographic and cultural shifts of

the past two centuries- their halachic observance isn't total or complete. For example, it is not uncommon for secular Jews in Israel to attend shul on Shabbat, pray fervently, conduct a Shabbat meal, and, subsequently drive to a sporting event or an outing. We all yearn for an era in which every Jew will merge all three aspects of Jewish identity. Before that day arrives we deeply appreciate and ratify whatever layers of Jewish identity exist. Ratification of a single layer of Jewish identity doesn't condone the lifestyle. It merely acknowledges that Jewish identity has layers.

Appreciating this layering also helps us grasp the enormous changes in Israeli society. Our State was founded, and initially shaped by an aggressive and overtly anti-religious culture. This dismayed many religious Jews who had hoped for a more religiously-toned state. This was also partially responsible for the rejection of the State of Israel within many Orthodox circles which could not fathom a redemptive process directed by such explicitly anti-religious founders.

The "ideological demographics" of our State have dramatically shifted. Though most Jewish Israelis are still not classically religious, the overwhelming majority of them believe in G-d, and acknowledge a form of divine authority. This is a very different landscape from 1948. Millions of Jews still stand at the ocean proclaiming ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד. Hopefully they will advance along the timeline, and recover the life of Torah commandments instituted at Sinai. Until that time the echo of that proclamation still rings through our Land and resonates in Heaven. ■