
Thought of the Week

By Rabbi Zvi Yehuda

FREEDOM OF CHOICE is a basic doctrine in Judaism (Deut. 30:19). Man himself – within the limits of his given situation – is responsible for his decisions and actions. He is free to choose between good and evil. Man's moral condition is thus attributed to his own conscience; neither to Divine pre-destination, nor to capricious fate or blind chance. This element of freedom of choice makes man accountable for his conduct; it also determines its ethical or religious quality. Any act committed by coercion is ethically and religiously neutral, neither good nor evil. An enforced act is morally meaningless. Only if it expresses human free volition and determination is a "good" human act virtuous and meritorious. Religious and ethical living cannot be imposed; it must be embraced.

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“GOD IN EXILE”—the mystical idea that God’s presence is marred during the exile of His people—intriguingly expresses both the degradation of Jews’ homelessness and the sublimity of God’s love for them. Portraying God’s involvement in redeeming His people, Isaiah uses a cryptic phrase, traditionally read and understood to convey the message of God’s full identification with the sufferings of His people (63:9): “In all their trouble, He Himself is in trouble.” As this concept points to the negative aspects of Jewish exile, it also underlines the positive, promising Jewish conviction that God is always with His people, suffering with them and in need of being redeemed with them. In Deuteronomy (30:3) Moses describes God’s future restoration of His people: “The Lord your God will restore your fortunes and show His love to you.” The Talmud observes (Meg. 29a) that instead of using the causative verb “heshiv” for “restore,” as expected in this context, Moses uses the intransitive verb “shav.” This indicates: By restoring His people, God, in a manner of speech, will also restore Himself. In the messianic future, as perceived in mystical terms, both the people of Israel and the God of Israel shall be together redeemed from exilic constrictions to ultimate glory.

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MOSES AND ISAIAH rhetorically address the whole universe – “the heavens and the earth” – Moses starting his Song (Dt. 32:1-3) and Isaiah his prophecies (1:2):

Moses:

Give ear, O heavens, as I speak!

Hear, O earth, the words of my mouth!

Isaiah:

Hear, O heavens;

Give ear, O earth, for the Lord has spoken!

Poetically calling upon the heavens and the earth to listen, both prophets address the people, urging them to give heed. Why does Moses use “give ear” for heavens, and “hear” for earth, and Isaiah the reverse? **Midrash:** “Give ear” indicates more closeness than “hear.” Isaiah, rebuking the people, was closer to earth; Moses, singing to God, was closer to Heaven.

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“IN ALL THEIR TROUBLES HE IS TROUBLED” (Isaiah 63:9) refers to the idea that God identifies with His people’s sufferings. This rendition of the phrase is based on reading the Hebrew word *lo* as a pronoun, and not as the word is spelled (indicating “no.”) According to the spelling *Ketiv*, however, the entire passage may be construed and translated as follows:

He said, Truly they are My people,
Children who will not betray,
So He became their deliverer,
In all their troubles.
Neither envoy, nor messenger,
Only His own Presence saved them;
In His love and compassion,
He redeemed and raised them forever.

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THE RESTORATION OF JERUSALEM, as divinely promised, is a dominant theme in the prophecies of Isaiah (62:1):

For Zion's sake I will not be silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet,
Till her vindication shines forth
like the brightness of dawn,
her victory like a torch aflame.

Isaiah is not content, however, with his own vigorous outspokenness; he insists that the people join him. The people must become the vocal guardians of Jerusalem; they must persistently "remind" God to keep His pledge to Jerusalem. In striking imagery, the prophet speaks to the city and to her people (6-7):

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem,
I have stationed watchmen;
By day or by night, never shall they be silent.
O you, who are the reminders of the Lord,
take no rest!
And give no rest to Him —
Until He re-establishes Jerusalem,
Until He makes of her the pride of the earth.

The ultimate responsibility for the glorious future of Jerusalem rests with the people. Even as God is credited with the promise, the people are charged with the duty to "give no rest to Him" until He fulfills His promise.

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THE CENTRALITY OF JERUSALEM in Jewish life is eloquently expressed in Isaiah's prophecy (62:1): "For Zion's sake I will not be silent; for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her vindication shines forth like the dawn, and her triumph like a burning torch." For Jews, Jerusalem is more than territory, more than a capital city or a holy city; it is a tangible manifestation of the very essence of the people—their history and destiny. Jerusalem (also called Zion, Excellence) is a living symbol of Judaism's faith in ultimate redemption. Bleak and threatening as the international, political climate may seem, Jews draw strength from Isaiah's vision, that Jerusalem's victory and glory will ultimately shine forth.