

# Redemption and the State of Israel: How Liturgy on Redemption is Handling Zionism

*Michael Lewis and Samuel Stern*

Across summer camps and teen tours at Reform and Conservative camps in the United States, as participants say the *Birkat HaMazon* after their communal meals, they add the line הרחמן, הוא יברך את מדינת ישראל, רשית צמחת גולאתינו (The Compassionate One, who blesses the State of Israel, the first flowering of our redemption). This line is not just limited to NFTY's Israel trips for teens. Rather, in the official bencher of the Reform Movement, this הרחמן is featured and replaces others that are ideologically opposed to the tenets of Reform Judaism. While this singular line is often sung in passing (and many readers may not even understand what it means), it poses a question about the theology of Jewish liturgy as a whole and our relationship with it as a movement based on informed choice. Redemption and its tie to the Land of Israel and the City of Jerusalem has been a critical, though evolving, aspect of the Jewish theology and liturgy over

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the entire history of the Jewish people. Yet in the twentieth century, as Jews across the world returned to the Land of Israel, established Jewish-based sovereignty over the Land, and rebuilt Jerusalem, it poses a liturgical challenge to this concept of redemption and its tie to the land. In this article, we will discuss the role of the Land of Israel and the City of Jerusalem in Jewish liturgy by comparing changes over time and across different movements and ideologies. Additionally, we will focus on the *shoresh* פ"ד and how that “flowering” of redemption was a trope that inspired secular, labor-based Zionism during the initial waves of *aliyah* in the early twentieth century.

### Redemption in Jewish Tradition

From the story of the Exodus to the NFTY children singing *Birkat HaMazon*, redemption has played a central, if changing, role in the expression of Judaism for the entire existence of our people. While in the biblical context, redemption can carry individual legal obligations and can refer to moments in which an individual plays a legal role in a jurisprudential sense as a next-of-kin, the broad notion of national redemption becomes the primary focus of the Jewish concept of *g'ulah*. Scholars like Arthur A. Cohen have noticed the inherent flexibility of a concept as broad as redemption. “Redemption is a concept without fixed content, unlike the phenomenon of covenant, or specific *mitzvot*, or acts of mercy and justice,” he argues. “The latter have settled definitions and significance and cannot be molded and shaped to meet the requirements of shifting communal sentiment, whereas redemption—precisely because it lacks fixed content—can include all the eschatological notions of the tradition, subsuming them to its unique promise.”<sup>1</sup> His argument about the flexibility of a broad concept like redemption is proven by *g'ulah*'s changing nature over the course of Jewish history.

National *g'ulah* emerged as an early thematic idea as far back as the foundational story of the Exodus. The notion of deliverance and redemption (in many cases using the *shoresh* פ"ד rather than ג"א) is prominently featured in the story of the Exodus as a group of slaves are taken by God from their depressing situation into the Promised Land, flowing with Milk and Honey. The Torah also returns to this redemption in Deuteronomy's retelling of the Exodus. In the post-Sinai Jewish world, national redemption

becomes prominent again after the first exile and the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. Again, in this moment, redemption becomes closely connected with the Land of Israel, and in the Book of Isaiah, the prophet shares what will happen when the Israelites/Judeans return to Jerusalem. "And the many nations will go and say: 'Come, let us rise up to the Mountain of *YHVH*, to the House of the God of Jacob, that [God] may instruct us in God's ways and that we may walk in the paths of God, for Torah will come out from Zion, the word of *YHVH* from Jerusalem."<sup>2</sup>

Even as Jews did eventually return to the Promised Land for a second time and rebuilt the Temple, the notion of redemption remained a prominent concept. As Cohen notes, "The predicament of human beings is that they conduct a difficult life in this world . . . Whatever the situation of human beings, their days are marked with finitude and limit, constrained by the boundary markings that infect their days with temporality, loss, uncontrol, anxiety and despair."<sup>3</sup> So, despite the return to the Land, human beings continued to struggle with the daily challenges of life and "man's finite condition as the primary state from which he required redemption."<sup>4</sup> With the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of the Rabbinic era, the notion of redemption underwent a radical shift as it shifted with the unique nature of its own time period once again. In the Rabbinic age, redemption became singularly a national project rather than something personal and relevant, and national freedom, especially from Roman rulers, became the primary focus of redemption. Reminding Jews of their challenges with Rome, Rabbinic texts harken back to an earlier era in which an individual (Moses) was chosen by God to do God's bidding in the effort to redeem the Israelites from the hands of a foreign dictator, Pharaoh. This redemption became entirely God-based. "The view is also found that in contrast to past redemptions that were affected by human agency and were therefore only temporary redemptions," in the eyes of Rabbinic Judaism "the final redemption will be accomplished by God [God's] self and will be eternal."<sup>5</sup> Finally, the medieval and modern commentators on the Jewish tradition continued to grapple with the notion of redemption in various different manners: "Redemption has been viewed as referring to the eventual triumph of good over evil, to the striving of individuals to self-fulfillment, to the achievement of social reforms, and also in terms of the reestablishment of a sovereign Jewish state."<sup>6</sup> The daily struggle and persecution Jews

faced across Europe and the constant threat of pogrom helped elevate the notion of national redemption both in modernity and pre-modernity. Thus, over the history of the Jewish story, people have grappled with redemption in various different ways. By its nature, redemption is subjective based on the context of the individual era or generation. Yet here we will begin to explore how different movements and ideologies have handled national redemption in relationship with the Land of Israel and the City of Jerusalem, as reflected by various changes in Jewish liturgy.

### Liturgical Expressions of Redemption

In the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, as Rabbinic Judaism codified the Oral Law and the traditional liturgy became cemented, national redemption played a prominent role in the codified liturgy. But before diving into specific blessings and differences between movements, we must explore the language used to describe this redemption. It is primarily driven by four major concepts in Hebrew. The first, *g'ulah*, as mentioned above, is the broad, changing notion of national redemption. Second, the word פִּרְחָה appears in some capacity in nearly every construction and conversation about *g'ulah*. According to Brown–Driver–Briggs, the lexicon of biblical Hebrew, the *shoresh* פִּרְחָה refers to the idea of sprouting or growing, commonly used for agricultural purposes regarding plants growing during the spring. It can also sometimes refer to “flowering.” Ultimately, this concept of *g'ulah* sprouting or flowering is a powerful metaphor for how redemption behaves. The process of a plant flowering is an incredibly natural process, driven primarily by the efforts of the sun and a specific, correct amount of rain. As the process continues, it creates a beautiful although temporal plant, featuring beauty and aroma. Certain plants can even become representative of the idea of hope or love. During the time of its life, the flower or plant (depending on its type, this process is assisted by wind or a symbiotic species like bees) is able to spread its seed in order to foster a future generation of the plant, even after the original plant itself dies. In the process, the individual flower withers and eventually dies but its DNA is secured for the flowering process to begin again. By using the notion of פִּרְחָה with redemption, the liturgy is referring to the start of a beautiful, natural process that is also inherently mortal. This is a powerful

commentary on redemption and its relationship and dependence upon human mortality. As much as redemption may be an ultimate goal for human beings that we consistently seek, the nature of redemption “flowering” reminds us of the inherent mortality of the process of redemption. In relation to national redemption coming through the Land of Israel, the liturgy is directly referring to the concept that Jews have held sovereignty over the Land of Israel on several occasions (i.e., the Israelites *have been* nationally redeemed from Egypt, the Babylonians, and Antiochus and his Greek Empire), but that in each case, the end eventually occurred and Jews were spread (like seeds of a flower) to the four corners of the Earth. In some ways, פְּדוּת and the sprouting of redemption is referring to the concept that redemption is a consistently moving target that features eras of growth and eras of withering, but it can be reshaped to fit the ideas and notions of a particular generation. Later in this article, we will discuss the relationship between Labor Zionists and the concept of redemption, but their capital city, Tel Aviv (Old-Spring, representing creating new out of the old), has a reference to the season of the year in which פְּדוּת occurs.

The third and fourth liturgical standards in sections related to redemption are the reference to a מְשִׁיחַ who comes from the House of David and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. These two metaphors are, again, directly referring to Jewish history. In each moment when Jews/Israelites managed to redeem the Land of Israel, an individual leader emerged to lead the redemption of the people, whether it was Moses leading the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land, King David securing sovereignty, the Maccabees throwing off the yoke of the Greeks and creating a sovereign Judea, or David Ben Gurion and the Zionists leading a remarkable battle to secure the Jewish State. In each of these cases, the esteemed leader (who is not a *mashiach* but is historically considered a larger-than-life figure) ties themselves to the stories of each other and the history of the Jewish people. And, throughout all of that, the redemption of Jerusalem remains a critical and necessary feature of redemption.

This best expresses itself in the liturgy during the *Amidah*, both in the lead-up to the *Amidah* and during the intermediary blessings of the weekday *Amidah*. Before the *Amidah* begins, the liturgy directly hints at redemption as a critical feature of the most significant moment of prayer: “Rock of Israel! Arise to the help of Israel! Deliver (פְּדוּ), as you promised, Judah and Israel. Our redeemer (גֹּאֲלֵנוּ), the

[God] of Hosts is [God's] name. Blessed are You, [God], who redeemed Israel."<sup>77</sup> As the liturgy seeks to transition from the creedal statements of the *Sh'ma* and its blessings, it uses this blunt statement about redemption to help center the individual on one of the critical features of the prayer.

The text of the *Amidah* continues to be centered around the notion of redemption. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, Ph.D, via his teacher Leon Liebreich, notes that the Talmud discusses the intention with which Rabban Gamliel chose and organized the intermediary blessings of the *Amidah*. "The entire set of blessings constitutes the most coherent statement we have on the Rabbis' view of redemption."<sup>78</sup> In his argument, he views the progression of the thirteen intermediary blessings as the path for redemption, describing what individuals must do (knowledge, *t'shuvah*, and forgiveness) in order for redemption to occur, and then outlines what the process of redemption will look like, beginning with healing and then a blessing about the land being filled with plenty and concluding with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Messiah coming from the House of David. In the views of Jewish liturgy and the framework established by the Rabbis, redemption becomes a central and integral objective in prayer and that redemption is tied closely to the Land of Israel. The liturgy uses the four central metaphors—*g'ulah*, flowering/sprouting, Jerusalem, and the Messiah Ben David—in order to capture the various essences of redemption. It is simultaneously broad and changes over generations, as exemplified by *g'ulah*, and resonant of spring but mortal like צמח ק"ץ. Yet in the specific iteration of redemption sought out by the Rabbis, it is also concretely connected to the Land of Israel, the City of Jerusalem, and an individual who, via God, shepherds the process along.

### **Dealing with Sovereignty: Different Movements Address the Land**

As the *Amidah* discusses the specific path toward redemption, Jews returning from the four corners of the Land to reclaim and rebuild the land is a central point. Despite very few changes to *HaT'filah* over centuries, a question arose when suddenly Jews came from all four corners of the world and started establishing *kibbutzim* and the framework for Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Different denominations and sects of the Jewish world have addressed

redemption in the *Amidah* differently, and this becomes especially poignant in the twentieth century with the rise of Zionism. The changes in these siddurim reflect certain attitudes, particularly how the movements address the return of the Jewish people to sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Some groups, mostly ultra-Orthodox, claim the modern-day State of Israel as illegitimate for one reason or another, but both traditional and progressive Jewish movements have tried, in their liturgy, to address the sovereignty of the Jewish People through the norms of traditional liturgy.

The Koren siddur is one of the more popular traditional Orthodox siddurim, and in its text of *Emet V'Yatziv*, *Tzur Yisrael*, and the blessings of the *Amidah*, it ignores any change in status for the Jewish people. These blessings look largely the same today as they were in May of 1948. The prayers for the rebuilding of Jerusalem speedily in our days are unchanged, as is the blessing that asks that the flowering of our redemption come in the form of a *בן דור*. Where the Koren siddur does acknowledge the reality of the modern political landscape is in additional services, specifically Yom HaAtzma-ut and a Blessing for the State of Israel connected to the Torah service. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes in his commentary, "The declaration of Israel's independence was a remarkable act of faith . . . If, as we believe, there are events that bear the signature of Heaven, this surely was one. Therefore, we give thanks to God for bringing the land back to the people, and the people back to the land—the land where our people was born in ancient times, and reborn in ours."<sup>9</sup> Contrary to the ideas of Chareidi or right-wing Orthodoxy, which is opposed to Jewish sovereignty, Sacks offers the religious-Zionist opinion that it was God's seal that the modern State of Israel came into being. As with other siddurim, it includes a prayer for the State of Israel which refers to God as *Tzur Yisrael V'Go-alo* and blesses this "*Reishit Tzmichat G'ulateinu*."<sup>10</sup> Bringing this phrase into a Prayer for the State of Israel that is separate from the other conceptions of redemption in the liturgy shows two key characteristics of the traditional Zionist orthodox conception of redemption in the time of Jewish sovereignty. On one hand, it shows that the authors see the restoration of Israel as a sovereign nation in its own land as not merely a secular event but connected to the prophetic vision of redemption in the Rabbinic era outlined in the *Amidah*. On the other hand, because this redemptive event is viewed as just the first step of redemption and not the end of the process, the traditional



liturgy seeks to keep the original prayer intact and supplements it with a special prayer recognizing its own conception of redemption. In line with the previously outlined concept that the flowering of redemption looks different in each circumstance and generation, the traditional movements seek to incorporate their modern notion of redemption in the context of the Rabbinic ideal outlined in the original *Amidah*. This prayer was originally composed by the Israeli *rabbanut harishit* and is partially reproduced in Conservative siddurim, the traditional siddur *Rinat Yisrael*, and the Koren siddur printed by the Orthodox Union.

The siddurim of the Reform and Progressive Jewish movements have more variety in their conception of redemption and its relationship to the State of Israel. Today, there are numerous changes from the traditional rubric, the most noticeable coming in the *Amidah* intermediary blessings relating to redemption. In *Mishkan T'filah*, the American Reform Movement's siddur, the Movement changes traditional Hebrew in a number of places to shift the people to central stage. It urges God to make the people strong while we await redemption. Instead of banding us together from the four corners of the earth and ingathering the exiles in the blessing for *Cheirut*, *Mishkan T'filah* applies this blessing to a more general call for freedom and justice, not one for our people to be reunited in *Eretz Yisrael* by divine providence. In the blessing about salvation, *Mishkan T'filah* removes the metaphor of King David despite maintaining the same *chatimah*. The text also alters the blessing for Jerusalem in a similar light, seeking peace and calm for the city and its inhabitants rather than urging God to dwell in the city and rebuild it as part of the process of redemption.

While these texts include an aversion to direct references to God creating redemption in the format espoused by traditional, Rabbinic Judaism, these are still significant changes to the Reform Movement that show how the relationship between redemption and the Land of Israel changed. The modern Reform siddurim give credence to the notion of redemption with their own spin (that humankind can bring about universal redemption by engaging in social justice and *tikkun olam*), rather than throwing out redemption altogether. This relationship is directly tied to the Land of Israel, as the Reform *Amidah* maintains blessings for the redemption of the Land and keeps the notion of greater redemption as a central theme, despite taking a different route to arrive at



redemption than traditional Judaism. This view is much different than the earlier Reform notions of redemption in siddurim like *The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship*, published in 1940. In the intermediate, weekday blessings of the *Amidah* of this pre-State prayer book, the text includes just four blessings: knowledge, return to the Torah, repentance, and a petition for God to hear the prayers and supplications. The notion of redemption as part of the *Amidah* and any connection to the Land of Israel is entirely shattered in the 1940 edition (though the text does maintain *Tzur Yisrael* before the opening of the *Amidah*). Rather, the statement about redemption comes from the English text of the *Aleinu*:

May the time not be distance, O God, when Thy name shall be worshiped in all the earth, when unbelief shall disappear and error be no more. We fervently pray that the day may come when all men shall invoke Thy name, when corruption and evil shall give way to purity and goodness, when superstition shall no longer enslave the mind, nor idolatry the blind eye, when all who dwell on earth shall know that to Thee alone every knee must bend and every tongue give homage."<sup>11</sup>

The *Union Prayer Book* and Reform Movement could not shake themselves entirely of the concept, but rather they removed any traditional ideas about redemption in the *Amidah*, fitting into the greater idea of redemption as evolving for each generation. While the Zionist project was fully functioning and saving thousands of European Jews from the fiery pits of the Holocaust, the American Reform Movement sought to separate redemption from the old-world conception of Rabbinic Judaism, including distancing its own version of redemption from the Zionist movement and the Land of Israel. The shift in *Mishkan T'filah* to include more direct references to redemption in the *Amidah* and to connect that specifically to the State of Israel is a significant theological statement for the Reform Movement, recognizing that Jewish sovereignty over the Land of Israel has fundamentally changed the Reform Movement and the Jewish people while altering the course of Jewish history.

### A Secular Movement Uses Religious Texts

In addition to the different liturgical adjustments that religious movements used to explain their concept of redemption in the context

of Jews returning to the Land of Israel, the original Zionist movements capitalized on religious language to facilitate the growth of their secular movement. Despite their aversion to the religiosity of Eastern European Jewry, the Zionist movement used this religious idea of redemption of the people via rebuilding the land to facilitate the growth of the movement in Eastern Europe. Despite the avowed secular nature of the movement, there was an underlying reference to the liturgical texts tying redemption to Jewish return to the Land. This came to the forefront during the Declaration of Independence by Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben Gurion. Ben Gurion proceeded through the hastily written and edited text without directly mentioning God, rather focusing on Jewish history and relationship to the Land, the contemporary political situation, and the vision for the State of Israel. But at the very end of the text, he gave credence to the idea of the State as a part of redemption, writing "WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream - the redemption of Israel."<sup>12</sup> Then, he immediately refers to the liturgy, "placing our trust in the Rock of Israel," drawing the reader to consider the statement just before the *Amidah* of *Tzur Yisrael*. In this profound moment of culmination for the Zionist movement, Ben Gurion draws redemptive liturgy into the heart of even the most secular Jew showing that the State of Israel is part of the story of redemption of Israel.

### Is Israel Redemption?

The discussion of this article helps us ask the critical question: What role does the State of Israel play in redemption? Is it, in fact *reishit tzmichat g'ulateinu*, as stated by the Prayer for the State of Israel and NFTY participants during the *Birkat HaMazon*? Redemption as a concept has retained aspects of its three parts over the entire course of Jewish history: *g'ulah*, Jerusalem, and the seed of David. All of this is expressed closely with the metaphor of "flowering" utilized to describe redemption in all liturgical contexts except the early Reformers in the United States. Redemption is a concept that inherently must have a specific end date, yet it is characterized by a metaphor that is mortal but infinitely cyclical. Jewish history has been filled with moments in which the nation has been redeemed—from

the Exodus to the Maccabees to the modern era—and the State of Israel appears to be related to those moments in the return to Jewish sovereignty to the land central to Jewish text and tradition. Different movements and ideologies—from the early Zionists to the Orthodox to Reform Jews in the United States—have dealt with this question in various different manners, ranging from a supplementary prayer that sees Israel as part of the process of redemption to entirely removing political/earthly ideas about statehood from the bigger concept of redemption. This further expounds on the fact that redemption can have different meaning for different individuals based on context and the world around them, but that, as long as suffering exists and humans seek and strive to explain mortality, redemption will remain a necessary part of the picture. The metaphor of *גאולה* unites each Jewish concept of redemption, recognizing that it is an inherently mortal process despite an immortal underlying goal. The State of Israel is another step in that process, as shown by the various manners in which movements and groups of Jews have dealt with the return to the Land and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the context of their liturgy.

### Notes

1. Arthur Cohen and Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 763.
2. Isa. 2:3, translation made by JPS.
3. Cohen and Mendes-Flohr, *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, 762.
4. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2006), 152.
5. *Ibid.*, 152.
6. *Ibid.*, 154.
7. Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2016), 106.
8. Lawrence A. Hoffman and Marc Brettler, *My People's Prayer Book* (New York: Jewish Lights Publishing), 33.
9. Sacks, *Koren Siddur*, 914.
10. Sacks, *Koren Siddur*, 523.
11. *The Union Prayer Book for Jewish Worship* (New York: CCAR, 1940), 151.
12. "Declaration of Establishment of State of Israel," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 14, 1948, [mfa.gov.il](http://mfa.gov.il) (accessed on December 20, 2017).