



The Religious Sensibility of Hatikvah

R. Micha'el Rosenberg – rosenberg@hadar.org

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Although it eventually won out, it was not always obvious that “Hatikvah” would be the Israeli national anthem. There were other competitors, and various critiques of the poem written by Naphtali Hertz Imber.¹ Among those critiques was a voice from at least some religious Zionists who thought the work too secular to reflect the religious import of the new state. Some advocated instead for Psalm 126 (often known as Shir ha-Ma'alot), as the national anthem:²

תהלים קנו:א-ב	Psalm 126:1-2
¹ שִׁיר הַמַּעֲלוֹת	¹ A song of ascents.
בָּשׁוּב ה' אֶת שִׁיבַת צִיּוֹן	When Hashem restored the fortunes of Zion,
הָייֵנוּ כְּחֹלְמִים:	we were like dreamers
² אָז יִמְלֵא שְׂחוֹק פִּינוּ	² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
וּלְשׁוֹנֵנוּ רִנָּה:	and our tongue with shouts of joy.

¹ For a relatively full description of the anthem's history, see Neil Levin's liner notes available at <https://www.milkenarchive.org/music/volumes/view/sing-unto-zion/work/hatikva/>.

² My translation here is based on, but departs in important ways from, that of Mitchell Dahood in the *Anchor Bible Commentary*.



Despite their different origins—one a psalm from the Ancient Near East, the other a modern poem written by a European-born Jew who died in New York City—there is a certain kindred spirit to the two; where Imber’s poem speaks of a hope, the psalmist describes his people as “dreamers.”

Yet the differences loom large; the seeming secular/religious contrast may be the least of it. Fundamentally, these two poems cast their gaze in completely different directions. Shir ha-Ma’alot is a song of thanksgiving, that is, a rejoicing over good that has occurred in the past: “When Hashem **restored**... we **were** like dreamers / Then our mouth **was** filled with laughter...”³ We were like dreamers—not because our deepest hopes remained unfulfilled such that we were dreaming of a messianic future, but precisely because those dreams had indeed been fulfilled, and we were stunned by the sense that reality now felt like a dream.

Hatikvah, by contrast, is a song not of celebration, but of yearning: “As long as in the heart within, The Jewish soul yearns... our hope is not yet lost...” Hatikvah expresses a hope for that which is not yet manifest. This makes sense, given that the poem predates the founding of the State and was, informally at least, the anthem of the Zionist movement, before it took on that role for the State of Israel. But it’s stunning to think about this as the anthem of a state that actually exists. We are not singing that all of our hopes and dreams have been fulfilled, but rather, that they are not lost—that we hope for even better days and more complete fulfillment.

The critical line here, “Our hope is not yet lost,” is not an out-of-whole-cloth production of Imber’s poetic mind, but actually an allusion to a biblical verse:

³ In truth, translating the verbal tenses in this psalm is quite difficult; see Dahood in the *Anchor Bible Commentary*, p. 218. Nonetheless, that the psalm is a celebration of an already completed event seems clear.



יחזקאל לז:יא וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלַי בֶּן אָדָם הָעֲצָמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה הִנֵּה אֹמְרִים יְבֹשׁוּ עֲצָמוֹתֵינוּ וְאֶבְדָּה תְּקוּמָתֵנוּ נִגְזְרָנוּ לָנוּ:	Yehezkel 37:11 [God] said to me: “Mortal, these bones are the entire House of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones have dried out, our hope is lost, we are doomed.’”
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The verse comes in the context of Yehezkel’s famous dry bones prophecy. God has shown the prophet a valley covered in dry bones and asks whether such desiccated remains of life can ever be revived. When Yehezkel answers agnostically (“Hashem, God, [only] You know”), God responds by indeed restoring them to life. We, Israel, however, have lost our faith—“our hope is lost”—and do not believe that we can be restored.

The Beit Ya’akov⁴ points out that the image of the dried bones is intentional. The highest form of ritual impurity is *tum’at meit*, ritual impurity acquired through proximity to the dead. The Beit Ya’akov says that the reason dead bodies impart such a high level of impurity is precisely because the dead have, literally, no hope. Impurity is the ritual consequence of hopelessness. To be alive means to recognize always the potential for more, the recognition that we can move in the direction of redemption, even if in the present moment, we are nothing but dried up bones.

In this sense, Hatikvah is—whether Imber intended this or not—a deeply pious and humble national anthem. It is a recognition that the central theological command God gives the Jewish people is never to accept that our current state, no matter how degraded or decrepit, dooms us. When we sing Hatikvah, we are responding to God’s critique of those Jews who lost faith in Yehezkel’s day. We are not yet singing Shir ha-Ma’alot, celebrating the culmination

⁴ R. Ya’akov Leiner (1814-1878), on Bereishit 25:1 and 40:2.



of all that God has decreed for us. But unlike the Jews to whom Yehezkel was preaching, we know that however hard this moment might be, however it might feel like we are nothing but dry bones, hope is not lost—hope can never be lost. That is a national anthem that truly embodies the Jewish spirit.

