



Unless God Builds the House

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*In loving memory of my nephew, Yishai Elyakim Urbach,
who fell in Gaza one year ago,
a few weeks after setting out to build his own home.*

תהלים קכז:א

אִם ה' לֹא יִבְנֶה בַּיִת שֹׁא עֲמֵלוֹ בִּוְנֵיו בּוֹ:

Tehillim 127:1

Unless God builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Human beings cannot truly build alone. What we build by ourselves, the psalmist suggests, cannot ultimately endure.¹

¹ See, for example, R. Yehudah Ashlag's commentary on the Zohar (Peirush ha-Sulam, Parashat Pinchas #148):
"בית המקדש נבנה על ידי אדם. ועל כן לא נתקיים. כי הם צריכים להיות פעולתו של הקדוש ברוך הוא. ושלמה היה יודע"
"שמשום שזה הוא מעשה ידי אדם לא יתקיים. ועל כן אמר, אם ה' לא יבנה בית שוא עמלו בוניו בו. כי אין לו קיום."



And yet one of the most beloved songs sung in Israel on Yom Ha'Atzma'ut insists: "I built a house in the Land of Israel."² Human initiative—human courage, labor, and creativity—stands at the heart of the Zionist ethos. Even in religious communities where the day is marked by the recitation of Hallel, a prayer of gratitude to God, the name of the day itself—Yom Ha'Atzma'ut, Independence Day—centers the human story.

Some Jews objected to the State of Israel for precisely this reason.³ But even if we assume, as I do, that the founding of the state was a positive event—and that human beings are not only permitted but sometimes obligated to shape the world they wish to inhabit—the verse still presses its question: "Unless God builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

How can we reconcile the empowering experience of human capability, the blessed ideal of independence, with the humble, reflective religious voice that insists we cannot build anything alone? And what does this mean for how Jews should relate to the phenomenon called the State of Israel?

One possible answer lies in the psalm preceding my opening quote, one that we regularly sing during Birkat ha-Mazon for Shabbat and festivals:⁴

תהלים קנו:ד-ו

שׁוּבָה ה' אֶת [שְׁבִיתֵנוּ] כְּאִפְיָקִים בְּנִגְבִּי: הִזְרְעִים בְּדִמְעָה בְּרֶנָּה יִקְצְרוּ: הָלוֹךְ יֵלֶךְ וּבָכָה נִשְׂא מִשָּׁר הַזֶּרַע

בֹּא יְבוֹא בְּרֶנָּה נִשְׂא אֶלְמִתִּי:

² Datia Ben Dor, "Eretz Yisrael Sheli Yafeh ve-Gam Porahat." I first heard this framing of the question as a tension between psalms and Ben Dor's song from R. Raz Hartman over a decade ago. I was reminded of it last year when my five-year-old son learned the song in *gan* and asked me the same question.

³ See, e.g., R. Yoel Tetelbaum, *Va-Yo'el Moshe*, chs. 1-2 and R. Hayyim Elazar Shapira, *Minhat Elazar* III:64.

⁴ It has also entered the Yom Ha'Atzma'ut liturgy.



Tehillim 126:4-6

God, restore our fortunes like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. Although one goes along weeping, carrying the bag of seed, they shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

The psalm begins with a plea: “God, restore our fortunes.” The speaker recognizes that redemption requires divine help. But immediately afterward the poem turns back to human action: “Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy.” For many years I understood this verse in a simple way: the road is difficult, but in the end things will turn out well. That was until I encountered the following teaching from the Apter Rebbe:⁵

שפתי צדיקים, נביאים, על הושע י יב

ובדבר הזה הוא העיקר האמונה והבטחון, דהיינו מה שהאדם הזורע הוא מחסר ממונו על תבואה
לזריעה ומייגע עצמו בעבודת אדמה וביבול וחרושה וקצירה מחמת שהוא בוטח שיריוח בזה הרבה
לאחר זמן...

העצל הוא חובק את ידיו היינו לפי שהוא מחוסר אמונה ובטחון אומר בלבו מה לי לצרה הזאת לחסר
ממוני על הזריעה ולהתיש כחי בעבודת האדמה על ספק כולי האי ואולי יצמח. ובודאי כל הרואה ישחק לו
ואומר עליו שהוא שוטה גמור ואיש משוגע.

Siftei Tzaddikim, Nevi'im, on Hoshea 10:12

In this lies the essence of faith and trust: the person who sows diminishes their wealth by spending it on seed, and exerts themselves in the labor of the field—in fertilizing, plowing, and harvesting—because they trust that later they will gain much from it....

The lazy person folds their hands, for they lack faith and trust. They say in their heart.

“Why should I trouble myself, diminishing my wealth on seed and exhausting my strength in working the land, when it is all uncertain?—Perhaps nothing will grow!” Surely anyone who sees such a person will laugh and say they are a complete fool, a madman.

⁵ R. Yehoshua Heschel of Apta (1748-1825), great great-grandfather to 20th century theologian Heschel.



The most basic act of a person of faith, the Apter Rebbe suggests, is to sow. Sowing is a gamble. There is something irrational about it. Who says anything will grow? Who guarantees that the builders' labor will not be in vain? And yet—it would be madness not to sow. One cannot live without trust in the future.

In this sense, sowing is a powerful model for holding the tension between confidence in human action and submission to divine providence. The sower is active and engaged, yet never deludes themselves into thinking they are fully in control. The very fact that the process leading to germination is hidden from sight reminds them that while they must sow carefully—watering, tending, protecting—the outcome is not entirely in their hands.

This is why, on Yom Ha'Atzma'ut we can sing: “I built a house in the Land of Israel.” We celebrate the freedom that Jews longed for across generations to build homes and plant seeds in their land.

And yet honesty demands that we admit something difficult: we do not know whether this national home will endure, or whether, God forbid, “those who build it labor in vain.”

This awareness creates a double responsibility. On the one hand, we must continue sowing the seeds of the great dream of return. On the other hand, we must continually examine ourselves, ensuring that we leave room for God to join us in building this house, cultivate patience, and strive to be morally worthy of the project.

In Israel, not only seeds are planted in the earth. Sons and daughters, mothers and fathers are buried as well, lowered into the ground with tears by loving hands and hearts full of doubt, struggling to believe that their loss will not be in vain.



Our partnership in building this house means that we also bear the terrible cost of its construction. That is why the celebration of Independence Day is preceded by the grief of Memorial Day, Yom HaZikaron, when we pause before the joy and sit with the pain.

Even here we carry a double and paradoxical responsibility: to continue showing up for the work of building, ready to bear its cost, and at the same time never to stop imagining a world where sacrifices are no longer a necessity. For if God truly joins us in building this house, it cannot remain only ours. It must become what the prophet calls “כִּי בֵּיתִי בֵּית תַּפְלָה יִקְרָא לְכָל” - הָעַמִּים - My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Yeshayahu 56:7).

Only such a house can ultimately become the world envisioned by the prophet Isaiah, and read as the Haftarah for Yom Ha'Atzma'ut:

ישעיה יא:ו,ט

וְגַר זָאֵב עִם כְּבִישׁ וְנִמְרַם עִם גְּדִי יִרְבֶּץ...⁹ לֹא יִרְעוּ וְלֹא יִשְׁחִיתוּ בְּכָל הָר קֹדֶשׁ כִּי מְלֹאָה הָאָרֶץ דְּעָה אֶת ה'

כְּמִים לַיָּם מְכֻסִּים:

Yeshahayhu 11:6,9

⁶The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid.... ⁹They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

