



PERSPECTIVES

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Israel's Fear: The Destruction of the Third Temple

by Maj. Gen. (Res.) Gershon Hachohen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel needs to formulate a new Jewish-Israeli story that is attuned to the challenges of the future. This requires a political leadership with a lofty spiritual stature.

Last week's Tisha b'Av fast, which commemorated the destruction of the Second Temple as well as other great disasters in Jewish history, does not really have a place on the Israeli agenda. Yet fear of the destruction of the "Third Temple" is shared by many.

Some thinkers have warned of the "danger of the eighth decade." The monarchy of David and Solomon came to an end as a united kingdom in its eighth decade, and the Hasmonean kingdom shared a similar fate. Ari Shavit, in his new book *Third Temple*, analyzes how in the eighth decade of their independence, the Israelis have become their own enemies: "With security challenges one can cope...but the disintegration of identity cannot be overcome." Film director Gidi Dar, at the first screening of his *Legend of the Destruction*, conveyed a similar message, saying he fears the country might cease to exist.

Not all citizens of Israel harbor a fear of annihilation. Israel has many non-Jewish citizens. While enjoying full civic equality with their Jewish compatriots, they do not share the Jews' fear for the future of the country. This is because it is only Israeli Jews, not all Israeli citizens, who will face complete annihilation in such a horrific existential scenario. While it is true that in such a situation the residents of Umm al-Fahm or Taibe would lose the protective shell of the State of Israel, their continued existence in their places of residence, in the lap of the extended clan, would not be under threat.

Beyond physical survival, the destruction of the Third Temple of the Jewish people is of spiritual import. It would be such an immense catastrophe that it is doubtful

the Jewish people would ever recover. In this sense, Jewish anxiety about Israel's destruction has a cosmic significance.

This anxiety is a basic underlying component of Israel's identity and purpose as a Jewish state. In this vein, David Ben-Gurion repeatedly asserted that the state of Israel is not an end in itself but a means to the perennial goal of the "redemption of Israel, ingathering of exiles, and national independence." As he affirmed in 1950,

Neither security nor the development of the country is the true mission of the state. Those are only necessary conditions for the true mission. Because Israel is not like other countries, and there is no instance in history like the revival of the state of Israel: the uniqueness of its revival reflects the uniqueness of its destiny.... The entire people carried the hope of the redemption in its heart, and the state is only the beginning of that hope's fruition. And the ingathering of the exiles is the task and the destiny and the mission of the state of Israel. Without this endeavor it is emptied of its historical content and of no significance to the Jewish people in our day, in the generations that preceded us, and in the generations to come.

That awareness of a mission was shared in those days by an overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews. Shavit's book offers a masterly portrayal of the changes that, since Ben-Gurion's time, have fostered a completely different Israeli society. Those changes were influenced by global trends, and it is not only in Israel that domestic stability has been undermined.

The internal threat has a unique significance. In all its aspects—including with regard to Israeli Arabs—it is bound up with the story of the revival of the state. The threat of the destruction of the Third Temple is a fear that revolves around the question of the state's identity and purpose as a Jewish state.

What is needed is not just reexamination of Israel's Jewish roots but a cultural-religious effort to formulate a new Jewish-Israeli story that is attuned to the challenges of the future. On these issues, the people of Israel need a political leadership of lofty spiritual stature beyond the required managerial skills.

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Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.