

Idol Worship on Jerusalem's Mount Herzl

'We kept faith with Zion,' said Netanyahu on Independence Day eve. He's proud the Jews kept faith with a piece of land? Aren't religious groups supposed to keep faith with God?

✘ Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the torch lighting ceremony marking Israel's 70th Independence Day, April 18, 2018. Emil salman

What a coincidence! I, too, visited the Arch of Titus in Rome not long ago. But for some reason, I didn't hear groups of tourists from distant lands excitedly whispering, "Israel, Israel," as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu serenely told us, as if he had all the time in the world, at the torch-lighting ceremony on the eve of Independence Day.

I would guess that Netanyahu got mixed up, and perhaps he heard those voices at some evangelical conference in the United States rather than in Rome. But that isn't surprising, since we're talking about someone who once described how he met British soldiers in Palestine during his childhood, even though he was born a year after the British Mandate ended.

Netanyahu also said in his Mount Herzl speech, as the organizers tore their hair out in the desperate hope that he would finish already, that while in Rome, he searched the stones of the arch for something that would confirm Israel's claim to exclusive ownership of the Land of Israel. And he found "the menorah of the Temple that was destroyed."

Unlike Netanyahu, I didn't search the stones. But I was interested in the story of the last journey of Simon Bar Giora, who fought the Romans heroically in the year 70 C.E. According to the Roman historian Dio Cassius, the Romans were so angry at him that out of all the captive Jewish soldiers, he was the only one they executed, after first humiliating him by whipping him through the streets of Rome. He was hurled to his death from the top of the Tarpeian Rock.

Therefore, I wanted to visit this heroes' site more than I wanted to see the victors' arch. My heart is with the defeated, whose history is written for them, even when

it completely contradicts their own narrative.

For the Romans, Simon Bar Giora was presumably a terrorist, perhaps even a “mass murderer,” perhaps even “an arch-terrorist with blood on his hands.” And of themselves, who came to a land that wasn’t theirs to enslave its inhabitants, the Romans surely said that they were the embodiment of civilization and enlightened Western values.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to visit the Tarpeian Rock. But who cares about Bar Giora if there’s a single stone that will confirm Israel’s ownership of the entire land?

Therefore, I’ll move on to the main point. Netanyahu’s big idea wasn’t long in coming: “We kept faith with Zion,” he said. That’s strange. Adherents of all kinds of ideological movements generally keep faith with an idea or principle; religious movements keep faith with God. So doesn’t this statement, that the Jews kept faith with Zion, constitute a form of idol worship?

Moreover, if we’re talking about Zionism, which everyone agrees was a secular movement, is it conceivable that its followers kept faith with the land rather than with humanity? And one more question: Today, when the cult of land is only growing stronger, and the stock of nationalist circles is rising, is a true civic government even possible in Israel?

Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein said in his speech at the torch-lighting ceremony that when he got off the plane as a new immigrant, he saw “the hills of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, on which the footsteps of our forefathers are evident in every furrow.” For him, this is his homeland.

I’m pretty well convinced that on all his journeys through the land, Edelstein doesn’t see Palestinians and doesn’t think about whether they are citizens of the state or people living under occupation. Someone afflicted with ideological blindness sees only his own desires, not reality.

But it’s not just Netanyahu and Edelstein – both preoccupied with issues of honor and the order of their speeches – who are afflicted with ideological blindness. Most of the cabinet suffers from it.

A friend of mine once served as an emcee at some assembly, and when one of the

speakers finished his remarks, which greatly exceeded the time allotted him, my friend said, "And we thank the honored speaker for finishing his speech." Thus I, too, will say here, "Thank you, Netanyahu, for finally finishing your speech."

Life is much lovelier without his speeches.'



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