

Address given by Marc Weinberg – Mazkir of Bnei Akiva 5759 at the Yom Haatzmaut Celebrations Tuesday 20th April/5th Iyyar 5759

The Vision is still Alive

Birshut Harav Harashi, Mara Deatra, Mr Ambassador, President of the united Synagogue and all Chavrei Bnei Akiva.

I stand here today on the Fifty First birthday of the State of Israel and the Sixtieth anniversary of Bnei Akiva in Great Britain and Ireland, a movement which has dedicated itself to aliya and the centrality of Israel in the life of every Jew. The one question that I would like to ask is what is the fundamental value that has kept us so vibrant and fresh over the last sixty years ?

I feel that in order to understand what our central value has been , it would be correct to go back to our source and our inspiration, Rabbi Akiva.

At the end of Gemara Makkot we are told a wonderful story about a crucial event in the life of Rabbi Akiva. The Gemara paints for us the scene of a desolate site which was once the place where the temple stood and Lo and behold in front of the eyes of Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues a pack of wolves emerge from the Holy of Holies. Suddenly the Rabbis began to cry and Rabbi Akiva was laughing and asks them (Mipnei mah atem bochim) “why are you crying”, slightly puzzled they reply the obvious A place which is so holy and now a pack of wolves are roaming there shouldn’t we be crying ? Rabbi Akiva then explains to them his reaction. He refers to the prophecy of Uriah saying that if it has been fulfilled that Tziyon will be ploughed up like a field then the prophecy of Zecharia that “Od yeshvu zkenim oozkenot birchovot Yerushalayim, oorchovot hair yimalu yeladim veyeladot mesachakim birchovoteha” that old men and women will sit in the streets of Yerushalayim and the streets of the city will be filled with girls and boys playing, then this prophecy must one day be fulfilled as well The story finishes off with the Rabbis saying to Akiva “Akiva Nichamtanu Akiva Nichamtanu, Akiva you have comforted us, Akiva you have comforted us,” meaning Akiva you have taught us something.

This story gives us an insight to what was a fundamental value in Rabbi Akiva,s life, he was a visionary, he was standing amidst the ruins of the Temple but he was still able to smile, he was able to look ahead, his dream was still alive and he would never let go of it whatever the current reality was in front of him. For Rabbi Akiva life was exciting, it was a challenge. He looked at the opportunity life presented and over and above everything he had a vision.

The values of Bnei Akiva are built on this ability of Rabbi Akiva to envision. Let me elaborate! What does it mean to have a vision? What are the crucial components of a visionary. Firstly a visionary looks beyond the present time, having a vision means not being stuck in the now, Rabbi Akiva was able to look beyond the destruction of the Temple to the next stage of history. In Bnei Akiva as well we are always looking at new horizons, always searching for new educational techniques and new approaches of implementing our ideology. Bnei Akiva should always try to anticipate the next stage of Jewish History, and in preparation for that should face the issues that are at the cutting edge of Jewish life.

Secondly a visionary looks beyond the current ideas, having a vision means seeing what nobody else can see, being open to new ideas, the Rabbis could only see the destruction of the Temple but Rabbi Akiva could see the rebuilding, he challenged their conventional ideas and accepted attitudes, he tried to educate them to adopt a new approach, to see the other side of the situation. I think this dichotomy of perspective is also true for Bnei Akiva. Others look at a Bnei Akiva camp as a holiday camp but for us it's a chance to educate towards our vision, it's a full holistic Jewish experience. Others look at the Bayit as just a clubhouse but for us it's a place for debate and a home, which brings Israel into our lives. Others look at Israel camp as just tanning and touring but for us it's a culmination of an educational process where chaniichim begin to feel part of the Jewish nation and see how a Jewish nation lives.

Thirdly a visionary looks beyond their current self, having a vision means being open to internal change. A visionary says I am not happy with the way I am. This involves passion and motivation, it involves living for a goal and having a personal challenge. As a religious and communal leader Rabbi Akiva felt that a different attitude was needed in order to confront a new reality. As Bnei Akiva the followers of Akiva, we try to develop our educational curriculum, we respond to the now, we discuss our ideology, we challenge ourselves, we do not follow the party line. We should always be saying to ourselves we could do better in everything we do. As a movement we should never be content, we should always try to develop and enhance our ideology, taking a step back and not resting on our laurels.

If we are true leaders we must formulate our vision and never lose sight of it. Therefore I challenge you the Chaverim of Bnei Akiva to a twofold ideological vision. First and foremost Israel should always be a part of us, we want to contribute to the State. The Zionist period of draining the swamps has ended and we enter a new Zionist period for the people of Israel. Bnei Akiva of Great Britain and Ireland still has something to give to the people of Israel. Our tolerant attitude and open-mindedness and our total dedication to religion. We believe in not only building the land but building bridges between the secular and religious, we believe in the value of every Jew, we believe that Judaism is exciting and vibrant, something that is to be enjoyed. However we retain the knowledge that we have much to learn from the people of our homeland and we are willing to become active members in the Jewish State.

Secondly we have a role to play in the life of Anglo Jewry. We want to help secure the future of our Jewish community, we want to play our part in its renewal through educating Judaism in a dynamic way and through our desire to stimulate challenging debate. We want to work in partnership with shuls and support the community working together with other Zionist Youth Movements without compromising on our differences. Most of all we want to constantly renew our dedication to Torah V'Avodah and make Bnei Akiva the flagship of Religious Zionism and Modern Orthodoxy within Anglo Jewry.

Over the last Sixty years the impact of the Movement on the revitalisation of Jewish life has been incalculable, transforming many thousands of lives from indifference to a high level of commitment. It has also proved to be a major instrument of Anglo – Jewish Aliya, producing an element, which is now amongst the finest human resources in Israel. The list of achievements – is endless, 50 Hachsharot, 4 kibbutzim, over a 1000

Olim, over 500 Machanot, 10,000 educational weekends, learning sessions each week, 100s of publications, weekly shiurim and Minyanim, seminars to the former Soviet Union and the achievements go on and on and on. This is what our vision is about and we should stand up and be proud of it.

I feel that this is now the time to express our gratitude to the individual who has devoted his life to Bnei Akiva over the last Sixty years. No man has embodied this twofold vision more than Arieh Handler. He has dedicated his life to the Movement from being the first Mazkir of Bnei Akiva in 1939 to being the Chairman of Bachad fellowship in 1999, To quote the Emeritus Chief Rabbi “The emergence of Bnei Akiva-Bachad fellowship, in 1938, pioneered by a few visionaries, eventually changed the religious and communal map of Anglo Jewry and by extension even of Israel.” Arieh you are one of those visionaries, in fact you had the dream which has carried Bnei Akiva through the last Sixty years, you are an inspiration to myself to all the chaverim of Bnei Akiva and to the community as a whole. You are a true Talmid of Rabbi Akiva. Thank you !

We the Chaverim of Bnei Akiva have not lost that vision or hope of Rabbi Akiva, as we say in the Hatikva “Od Lo Avdah Tikvatenu”, that Tikva is the vision of Rabbi Akiva. We cannot and must not lose that ability to always look forward, to always look for new ideas and most of all to always look at ourselves and say we can change we can do better. We are the vision and the visionaries of the future. Others may be crying but we are smiling. Aloh Naaleh Im Bnei Akiva and a Chag Sameach!