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## RELIGIOUS RESPONSES TO JEWISH STATEHOOD

The centrality of Israel in contemporary Jewish life is bound to be reflected in a journal dedicated to "Orthodox Jewish Thought" especially since current events and policies in Israel are significantly affected by the pressures of religious groups inside and outside the Government, whether "hawks" like Gush Emunim, Lubavitch and Meir Kahane's Kach demanding greater militancy; or "doves" like the Agudat Israel holding the balance of power in the Coalition insisting on purely religious concessions. Thus *Tradition* has lately featured quite a few articles assessing the various religious attitudes toward Zionism and the Jewish State.<sup>1</sup>

Some of these contributions are scholarly and dispassionate; others polemical and plainly partisan. But virtually all of them examine, propagate, or rebut only one particular ideology or personal view. What has not been attempted so far is an overall survey of the different religious responses to the restoration of Jewish sovereignty as such and to Israeli policies generally, insofar as they are guided by, or impinge on, religious

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This article is concerned solely with the religious attitudes to the Zionist idea and the Jewish State. It does not deal with religious issues arising from Jewish statehood (for example, state-religion relations, religious legislation, "Who is a Jew," and the like). Special attention is also given to controversies between the various religious groups, as reflected in their writings.

The sources are limited, with few exceptions, to *rabbinic* writings (not mere statements) supporting or opposing particular views in the light of Jewish religious teachings and to documentation on such writings.

Within these limitations, there is sizable material on the Neturei Karta, Satmer, Agudah, Lubavitch and of, course, Mizrahi. *Oz VeShalom* has published some rabbinic responses and opinions, claimed to favor its stand, in several pamphlets and over 30 newsletters *Ha-Chug Harayoni Medini le-Ziyonut Datit*, Jerusalem), but none of these rabbinic writings specifically support the movement. Nor could I find such material on Gush Emunim (again other than statements, notably by its principal mentor, the late Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook), though the extensive politico-halakhic writings of Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren mainly (but never expressly) support its cause. On Kach, too, I am not aware of any rabbinic documentation, apart from the (non-halakhic) statements of its founder, Rabbi Meir Kahane.

perceptions. This article will inquire into the reasons for these extraordinarily diverse views, ranging from super-nationalism to rabid anti-Zionism, at least in the light of some historical antecedents as well as some inter-group polemics.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Comparing the religious inspiration of the Zionist movement over the ages with the religious reaction to its realization, one is struck by a strange mixture of paradox and ambivalence: the paradox of the movement's religious nurture before its emergence and the indications of widespread religious opposition, or indifference, to it after its fulfillment, and the ambivalence of the still-unresolved, indeed intensifying, diversity of views on the religious significance of the restoration of Jewish statehood. Partly both the paradox and the ambivalence may be due to the discrepancy between the reborn State of Israel and its biblical blueprint. Perhaps we are unreasonably impatient when we expect in three decades that spiritual consummation which previously took nearly five hundred years to evolve—the period separating the Revelation at Sinai, with its constitutional provisions for national and spiritual sovereignty, followed by Joshua's entry into the Land, and the building of the First Temple by King Solomon.

The origins of the Zionist idea are, of course, entirely religious. Many secularists are no less insistent than religious believers on the slogan "the Bible is our mandate" as the principal basis of our legal and historical claims to the Land. This "mandate" is itself derived from the purely religious covenant between God and Abraham, a Covenant reaffirmed with our people at Sinai and constantly reasserted by our prophets in the context of Israel's religious purpose and destiny. Through the ages, all our dreams and prayers for the Return to Zion have been religiously inspired. And we prayed not so much simply for *our* return, or the restoration of *our* national sovereignty, as for God's return and the establishment of His sovereignty in Zion. Our Return was merely the means—in the words of our daily prayers—for "restoring His Divine Presence to Zion."

Up to well in the 19th century, therefore, all *aliyah* movements were religious movements—from the pioneering beginnings of Nachmanides in the 13th century and the much more significant following of Karo, Luria and others of the mystic school settling in considerable numbers in Safed in the 16th century, to the bulk of the immigrants who founded the "old yishuv" in the 19th century.

Modern political Zionism could never have struck root if it had not been planted in soil seeded and fertilized by the millennial conditioning

of religious memories, hopes, prayers and visions of our eventual Return to Zion. Nor could Hebrew have been revitalized as a modern language if religious Jews had not persevered in maintaining its vitality and the reverence for it through prayer and study. In the 19th century, religious visionaries like Rabbis Zvi Hirsch Kalischer and Judah Alkalai played an important role as forerunners of modern Zionism as secular nationalists and humanists like Moses Hess and Leon Pinsker.

To this day, the primary dynamic of Zionism in its truest form remains religious. If we distinguish between positive and negative Zionism, or voluntary and involuntary *aliyah*—that is, those *drawn* to Zion simply by the love of the Land and those *driven* there by persecution or by rebellion against the ghettos and their traditions—then such positive Zionism is mainly religiously-motivated. Religious *aliyah* from the free countries is at least five times as high as the corresponding figure of nonreligious *olim*.

In light of these religious dimensions of Zionism—from its origin to the present day—it seems almost incomprehensible that the actual establishment of the Jewish State was greeted with, and still encounters, so much apathy and even downright opposition among large numbers of the religious community. Incredibly, the Arabs, the Vatican and an assortment of anti-Semitic countries are joined only by certain religious sections of our own people in the continued denial of formal recognition to the State of Israel. Since 1967, even the Reform movement has accorded a recognition to Israel which some very Orthodox segments still withhold.

## II

This nonrecognition assumes various forms; some more vehement, others more passive; a few more confined and quite a number more widespread. It includes the refusal to sing the *Hatikvah* or to teach modern Hebrew, to support appeals or other projects sponsored by the Israeli Government or the Jewish Agency, to read the Prayer for the State of Israel, to celebrate *Yom Ha'atsmaut*, or to concede that Zionism is an integral part of Judaism.

Yet, one must hasten to add, accentuating the paradox, it is out of this element that the Western *aliyah* rate is by far the highest, as is the flow of diaspora students learning at Israeli institutions. Entire communities of various hasidic sects have transplanted themselves to Israel from America and elsewhere, notwithstanding their opposition to the Jewish national idea in its existing form.

How can we explain or understand this contradiction between the passionate fervor of yearning for the Return and the apparent indifference to its realization; between the hostility to the State and the love for the Land of Israel?<sup>3</sup>

The paradox is equally striking at the other end of the religious spectrum. The most militant form of Jewish nationalism is today also generated out of religious convictions. Indeed, without the fierce idealism of the Gush Emunim settlers in Judea and Samaria, often cheerfully enduring extreme privations, self-sacrifice and perils, the pristine spirit of the early Zionist pioneers would now hardly exist at all. Their intransigence is all the more uncompromising because it is dictated by religious rather than political or military considerations.<sup>4</sup> Their main argument in defying the Israel Government, not to mention world opinion, by asserting the claim to Jewish settlement in the entire Land of Israel is precisely that this is required by biblical precept and halakhic imperatives. Other religious groups sharing this radical stance, notably Lubavitch,<sup>5</sup> are likewise motivated by purely religious dictates, though their attitude to Zionism as such, and indeed to the religious significance of Jewish statehood, may vary greatly.

### III

It would be an over-simplification, though not without some substance, to define the various groups by their observance or non-observance of *Yom Ha'atsmaut*: Those who recite *Hallel* with *Berakhah* (Mizrachi); without *Berakhah* (probably most religious Zionists outside Israel); no *Hallel* and *Tahanun* (many Agudists); and *Tahanun* (Satmar and numerous other hasidic as well as yeshivah elements)—with stones thrown (literally or figuratively) at those who say *Hallel* (Neturei Karta) or *Tahanun* (Kahane's Kach).<sup>6</sup> There are inconsistencies and overlaps in this classification.

Some find saying *Hallel* with *Berakhah* quite compatible with being in the Peace Now camp (Oz veShalom). On the other hand, there are *Hallel*-opponents who regard Jews in Israel as being in *galut* no less than in the diaspora, and are yet on the extreme right of the religio-political spectrum (Lubavitch); whilst other non-Zionists refuse to join the Israeli cabinet, for religious reasons, though they keep it in power by supporting the coalition (Agudah). Again, in many intensive Jewish schools where *Hallel* is officially proscribed, the *aliyah* rate among graduates is high (for example, the Hasmonean in London), whilst there are enthusiastic *Hallel*-sayers to whom *aliyah* is an ideal for others. The pendulum, hung on the same allegiance to the *Shulhan Arukh*, swings all the way from those prepared to negotiate with the PLO for living under Arab rule (Neturei Karta) to those seeking to expel the Arabs by violence if necessary (Kach).

What unites all religious groups, popular misconceptions and propaganda notwithstanding, is their aversion to a theocratic state<sup>7</sup> as demonstrated by the fraction with the greatest leverage and the most

far-reaching religious demands declining to accept cabinet posts (Agudah).

Even more important, what all these groups also have in common (as indeed with most secular Israelis, too) is an indifference to the non-Jewish world often bordering on disdain. This attitude may be quite understandable in the shadow of Western civilization's betrayal of the Jewish people leading to the Holocaust and the growing isolation of Israel in the world community. Nevertheless, this Jewish religious response, now so widespread in the most diverse religious circles, whether Zionist or anti-Zionist, does represent an abrupt disengagement from the universal dimension of Judaism in the tradition of Israel's prophets and sages. Such a withdrawal from "the mission to the nations," or the concern to promote their moral advance through Israel's example and its good name in their eyes, may be natural for hasidic or yeshivah elements conditioned to self-containment by the "galut-mentality" nurtured in Eastern Europe. But it is surprising that this introspective vision is equally shared even by those whom the Zionist idea inspires with messianic fervor, since the whole concept of messianism is after all inseparable from universal salvation and Israel's serving as "a light unto the nations."

#### IV

These common denominators apart, we may discern three principal divisions, each of them of course further ramified by various subdivisions.

First, and historically perhaps most significant, there is the non-Zionist, or more often even anti-Zionist, camp. Its activist heartland is the hasidic sect of Satmar.<sup>8</sup> Politically, this camp is prodded by the extreme fringe element of the numerically-insignificant Neturei Karta,<sup>9</sup> probably counting no more than a few hundred adherents in Israel and a few isolated diaspora fastnesses.

The antics and fanaticism of these anti-Israel zealots, repugnant to so many Jews, may be limited to these groups. So is their implacable hostility to the "Zionist heresy" as the incarnation of evil. But their basic philosophy in rejecting the legitimacy of Zionism is shared by a very large and important section of the Orthodox community. Sympathising with this attitude are virtually all the hasidic movements,<sup>10</sup> the bulk of what is known as the "yeshivah-world"<sup>11</sup> (with the notable exception of the Bnei Akivah yeshivot) led by most of today's leading Torah sages, and a considerable segment of the so-called "Independent Orthodox congregations"—all now experiencing such an extraordinary growth-rate all over the world. For all these, the foundation of Israel was and remains, religiously, a non-event. Together, the members of these groups may well run into several hundred thousand souls, possibly by now in excess

of half-a-million. The difference between Satmar, and even most Agudists,<sup>12</sup> who grant a form of *de facto* recognition to Israel, is one of degree and emphasis rather than of fundamentals. They all oppose political Zionism and negate Jewish Statehood as a manifestation of religious significance or prophetic fulfillment.

Their views are, to be sure, well-founded on Jewish literary sources and historical precedents. For instance, they refer to the famous oaths taken by the exiles of Jerusalem at the time of its destruction, and recorded in the Talmud (*Ketubot* 111a), never to reconquer the Land by force, or they point to Rashi's commentary (on Exodus 15:14) attributing the massacre of the tribe of Ephraim mentioned in the Book of Chronicles to Ephraim's attempt to anticipate the deliverance from Egypt by a premature and violent escape.<sup>13</sup>

Historical analogies, too, are not hard to find. There is the attitude of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai in coming to terms with the conquering Romans and in opposing the Zealots' resolve to continue the struggle. And there is the scorn with which Rabbi Akiba's colleagues ridiculed his claims for Bar Kochba's messianic mission in regaining Jewish independence from the Romans. These episodes certainly show that the anti-nationalist line is not altogether alien to the authentic Jewish tradition.

Nor are the numerous anti-nationalist rabbinical leaders and scholars today without predecessors of high eminence at other critical periods in our history. Leanings in this direction may well be found, for example, with a ranking thinker and statesman of the stature of Don Isaac Abarbanel, the principal Jewish leader and scholar at the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, and his reliance on a Messiah unaided by human effort. How different the course of Jewish history might have been, as has been suggested,<sup>14</sup> had he directed his fellow-exiles to reconquer or resettle their own land rather than to exchange the exile of Spain for that of Italy, Greece or Turkey in anticipation of the Messianic Redeemer. Even the resettlement of Jews in England some three hundred years ago was not unrelated to this line of thinking. Menasseh ben Israel pressed Oliver Cromwell to readmit the Jews on the ground that the coming of the Messiah would be imminent if only the Jewish dispersion were to be completed by its extension to England—*Angleterre*, “the end of the earth.”

Again, in the 19th century, the founder of modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, strongly affirmed the *galut* as an indispensable means to fulfil the Jewish mission to the nations, and he warned against any idea of a pre-messianic effort to restore Jewish national sovereignty in the face of Gentile opposition. Indeed, Hirsch may well be regarded as the spiritual father of modern religious anti-Zionism, as a reading of

his voluminous works will confirm.<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, distinct overtones of this philosophy can be detected even in the writings and policies of Martin Buber<sup>16</sup> and, for very different reasons, of Isaiah Leibowitz.<sup>17</sup>

Added to the support for their stand which these religious opponents of Zionism draw from Jewish literature and history, is their abhorrence of the secularization of Jewish life. They regard as utterly inconsistent the lofty visions of the Return to Zion by our prophets and sages with the realities of Jewish statehood today. They simply cannot believe that a secular state can be the fulfillment of biblical promises and millennial prayers. But it is only fair to stress again that their hostility to Zionism in no way compromises the love of the Land of Israel and often the intense encouragement they give their followers to settle there.

## V

The second important religious response to the national idea takes the exactly opposite line. It is represented by those who believe, with equal conviction, that the cataclysmic events culminating in the establishment of the Jewish State, followed by the reunification of Jerusalem and the Jewish reconquest of the bulk of the historic Land of Israel in the Six-Day War, are indeed happenings of the most momentous religious significance in fulfillment of biblical promises. Consequently, they hail these events as an essential and irreversible part of the final messianic process—“the beginning of the Redemption.”<sup>18</sup>

This school of thought finds its main exponents in the Mizrachi movement,<sup>19</sup> though its supporters include many beyond the confines of party lines. Its principal protagonists were spiritual and scholarly giants of the calibre of Rabbi A. I. Kook and Rabbi J. L. Maimon, succeeded by Rabbi I. H. Herzog and other rabbinic immortals of our age. Rejecting the literary and historic evidence produced by their opponents as misleading or irrelevant, they regard the experiences of our times as being without precedent, and they point to the miracle of Israel's rise from the catastrophe of the Holocaust, accompanied by the Ingathering of Exiles, as unmistakable signs that the first acts in the drama of the Final Redemption are at hand.

Naturally, the devotees of this philosophy, too, do not lack literary and historical material to sustain their religious Zionism. Statements in the Talmud and rabbinic literature extolling life in the Land of Israel, and its unity with the Jewish people and faith, are legion. The line of leading Sages advocating a mass return to Zion stretches all the way, certainly from Nachmanides to the present time. They also find ample halakhic support for the claim that it is a religious duty to engage in war to liberate the Land,<sup>20</sup> to bring it under Jewish control and to promote

the corporate expression of full Jewish life through the exercise of Jewish sovereignty. Since the highest aspirations of the Jewish people cannot be achieved without national independence, they regard life in the Jewish State even under nonreligious rule as preferable to Jewish exilic existence,<sup>21</sup> however intensive its Jewish vibrancy may be.

All religious nationalists would subscribe to these fundamental tenets. Yet there is today a major difference among them on the extent to which these beliefs must govern or override political considerations. Part of the argument also concerns the applicability of patently messianic calculations to the contemporary situation and its dilemmas. A considerable and still influential section of the Mizrahi movement, while not questioning the supreme religious significance of Jewish Statehood as a forerunner to the promised Redemption, nevertheless acknowledges the reality of factors beyond Israel's control—such as external political pressures, the impact of an ever-increasing Arab minority on the Jewish character of the State, and the claims of Palestinians to some territorial concessions for the sake of peace provided they do not constitute a security risk.<sup>22</sup> Ranking religious leaders inclining to this stance are Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik<sup>23</sup> and Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.<sup>24</sup>

Leading the fierce opposition to these moderates is the Gush Emunim movement,<sup>25</sup> which has gathered formidable strength since the Yom Kippur War, and which, despite its purely religious motivation, now enjoys widespread support among other ultra-nationalists as well. The late Rabbi A. I. Kook's passionate commitment to Jewish self-redemption in the Land of Israel is frequently cited as a vindication of the Gush Emunim platform today. But careful students of his prolific and inspired writings are inclined to challenge this posthumous invocation of support for a contrived eschatology of confrontation and militancy as alien to his pacific teachings and mellow character.<sup>26</sup>

For others, the battlecry "not an inch," with its "all-or-nothing" overtones, evokes ominous echoes of the Masada experience—an episode quite unique in Jewish history. Unique not because of its heroic martyrdom (for which there are ample parallels), but because of the declared preference by an extreme religious sect for a national euthanasia or death with dignity over life under foreign subjection, for which Jewish history has no parallel<sup>27</sup>.

Even more disturbing to the religious and historical sensitivities of many are the messianic undercurrents of this religious radicalism. The pages of Jewish history are littered with the debris, sometimes the lethal shrapnel, left behind by the explosion of pseudo-messianic movements, as grim reality dashed with shattering force the high expectations of imminent deliverance they had raised. The bitter wounds inflicted by devastating disillusionment stretch from the collapse of the Bar Kochba



rebellion<sup>28</sup> to the fearful aftermath of the Shabbetai Zvi debacle.

As will be explained in the next part, there is all the difference between messianic *hopes*, which constitute the very stuff of faith serving our people to prevail over our tribulations, and messianic *expectations* of impending salvation. Basing national policies or religious guidance on such *assumptions* can lead to catastrophic consequences against which we are forewarned by ample danger signals flashed from the shipwrecks of messianic disasters spread along the course of our annals for the past two thousand years.

## VI

Finally, between the two poles of intense religious nationalism and anti-nationalism, is a third grouping. Though less vociferous and politically less clearly defined or organized, it may still be most significant numerically. In contrast to the first group, its adherents strongly and unequivocally affirm their commitment to the State of Israel, supporting its institutions and recognizing its religious significance as a wondrous manifestation of Divine favor. They regard themselves as religious Zionists without reservation. Yet they differ from the second group in one crucial respect.

Perhaps this difference can best be illustrated by a critical distinction between the two versions of the Prayer for the State of Israel. The text attributed to the late Chief Rabbi Herzog, which is widely used in Israel and in some diaspora communities, specifically refers to the State of Israel as "the beginning of the sprouting forth of our Redemption." In other words, it authentically declares the Jewish State to be not only the fulfillment of our hopes and prayers, but the incipient phase in the process of the promised "Redemption," a term used only for the realization of our messianic aspirations. On the other hand, this phrase is omitted in the text authorized by the late Chief Rabbi Brodie, as it appears in the Singer's Prayer Book and is commonly used in Britain and the Commonwealth communities. This version passes no authentic opinion, or reserves final judgment, on whether or not the present State of Israel is in fact the embryonic nucleus out of which the ultimate Redemption is *bound* to develop, with all its universal ramifications of the Messianic era which form an essential part of Prophetic teaching and Jewish belief.

The difference between these two versions is of course not only of semantic, theoretical or even purely philosophical significance. It marks a fundamental divergence of views on the religious interpretation of present-day events as well as the place of the State of Israel in the perspective of biblical visions. From this divergence naturally flow some important practical consequences.

If the premessianic character of the State is taken for granted as a *certainty*, whether as an act of faith or of rational conviction, then obviously conscious and deliberate efforts must be made to ensure that all related biblical prophesies fall into place, and that our national strategy must be based on this assumption. This might, for instance, include the planned liquidation of the diaspora, or an unconcerned resistance to the pressures of world opinion, safe in the knowledge that the advances towards full Redemption are irreversible. Faith can thus govern pragmatic policies, and risks can be disregarded.

On the other hand, if the premessianic stage of our current experience lies in the realm of *hope*, rather than certainty, then such conclusions may not yet be warranted, and a more "realistic" approach may be indicated. This more cautious attitude, while it in no way affects the intensity of the commitment to Israel, would of course also cushion our people against the impact of reverses such as we suffered in the Yom Kippur War, and as may yet be encountered before Israel is finally at peace and the promise of Redemption shared by the entire human family.

For the protagonists of this view, the halakhic demand "not to rely on miracles" remains paramount and in contradiction to the widely-accepted dictum, first ascribed to Ben Gurion: "He who does not believe in miracles is not a realist" as a norm for Israeli policymaking. For them, neither the uncompromising determination with which we assert our national claims, nor the self-reliance on military strength, nor even the simple faith that in the end "all will be in order," can guarantee ultimate salvation. In their religious perspective, based on faith in the conditional character of the covenant between God and Israel, only religious and moral worthiness can provide such a guarantee, as spelled out in the second paragraph of the *Shema*, by all the prophets and reaffirmed by the Psalmist: "If only My people would hearken unto Me, and Israel walk in My ways, I would soon subdue their enemies and turn My hand against their adversaries" (81:15).<sup>29</sup>

## VII

This survey is confined to examining the different strands of the main religious responses evoked by the rebirth of Israel. It would not be complete, however, without at least cursorily projecting these responses, or their effect, onto the wider Jewish scene in the post-War world.

Even secularists will no longer deny that all these groups within the Orthodox community, whatever their differences, have made enormous contributions to the reconstruction of Jewish life after the devastation of the Holocaust. In fact, they now represent the only true growth element within the Jewish people. Enjoying a disproportionately high birthrate

