Teaching about Israel today is not merely teaching another subject like history or geography, nor is it a unit in “indoctrinating” students in Zionism. Today, when we are talking about Israel, we are discussing theology or rather the gestalt of Judaism. Israel at the present time is a dilemma to many nations and religions that find themselves in a world of secularism and atheism. It is a challenge to them and an opportunity for us.

The rebirth of the State of Israel is basically a religious happening in which all the messianic prophecies are beginning to be realized. The existence of Israel has become an immediate theological threat to Christianity. One of their creeds proclaimed the Jew a cursed creature who must be a wanderer until he repents and embraces Christianity. This creed was established in the famous Lateron Council by Pope Innocent III in the thirteenth century. Now the Jew has, with God’s help, returned to the Holy Land, established his own state, liberated Jerusalem with its holy places, and turned the idea of kibbutz galuyot into a reality—all of this in direct conflict with the Christian belief that the Jews are doomed and that Christianity will conquer the world (as they are trying through their missionary work). We have to take advantage of this theological confrontation and put it into proper perspective, showing our children how the prophecies of our prophets are being realized in our times.

But Christianity is not our only adversary. The twentieth-century secular world and its ideologies are even worse enemies. The nations which embraced Communism in the name of justice and raised its banner are the greatest enemies of Israel and the greatest anti-Semites to come forward since the Holocaust. They too abhor Israel and the Jews, and view Judaism as an ideology which is to be destroyed and abolished. They see Israel’s establishment as proof of the existence of a real Jewish nation, a challenge to one of their basic dogmas in relation to Jews. Lenin had proclaimed that the Jews were
only a sect and not a nation, an historical remnant which existed only because of anti-Semitism. Stalin reinforced Lenin's idea by saying that the Jews were a nation on paper only. Now, with the establishment of Israel, the Communist concept of nationality must be changed. Its theory that the Jews are in an advanced stage of assimilation and are even about to lose their national identity is bankrupt. Its theoreticians ignored the profound changes affecting the Jews of the Soviet Union as a consequence of the Holocaust, the rise of the State of Israel, and especially the events following the Six Day War. The renaissance of Soviet Jewry caught them off guard.

The popular image of the Jew in the diaspora has been an unfortunate one. Europe looked upon Judaism as a hypocritical, degenerate religion; its adherents reluctantly Jewish. Nietzsche claimed that the Jews had actually changed their values, reversing themselves after invaders had conquered their lands. When they were still a triumphant and warlike people, he argued, they valued as good those things which were bold, cruel and self-reliant. But after their decline, they gradually and systematically changed the good to refer to the humble and clever, while that which was strong, hard and self-respecting became evil. Sartre explained that the Jew was not a free man, that he did not choose to become a Jew. He felt that the Jew became what the Christian made of him.

These concepts were very influential in twentieth century–Europe. Now, with Medinat Yisrael, we have proven to the world that even though we have a state and we are strong, our ethics in all the wars and our attitude toward the Arabs in Samaria, Judea and other occupied territories have been exemplary (with very few exceptions). We have an obligation to expose their lie that the Israeli is a new type of Jew. He is a Jew with new types of opportunities and challenges. The code of morals which guides Israel expresses the same ethics written in the Bible, Talmud and halakhah as they were interpreted during the last 2000 years in the galut. For centuries, when the Jew was denied the opportunity to defend himself he could do nothing but withdraw and work at survival. Now, given the chance available to his ancestors of thousands of years before, he builds Hesder yeshivot, again studying Torah as he stands guard over Israel's borders. We should make sure that our students understand that this is our model of halakhic Judaism and that they realize that the exemplary ethics of the so-called secular soldier are actually those of the tradition. It may be the “non-religious” political parties which institute far-reaching social programs which serve as models for developing and developed countries. But they are actualizing halakhic values and concerns, not legislating “socialism.” This is Torah in its
broadest sense, and the details will conform more and more to the halakhah as the number of shomrei-mitsvot olim increase.

For the nations of the world, Israel is not just another state. Israel has proved them wrong in their basic concepts about a Jew, a Jewish nation and the living Jewish religion. Through her we were able to expose their false ideologies, their false philosophies and their false concepts that have been accepted by millions of people. They must now rethink their long-standing positions. And, in a different sense, so must we.

Alexander Dushkin, writing on Jewish American education in Sefer HaYovel Shel Agudat HaMorim HaIvriim (ed. Tsvi Sharfstein, 1959), observed that the basic ingredients of Jewish education resembled the Magen David. There are two interlocking triangles; one contains the three basic religious creeds (God, Torah and Israel), and the other contains the national creeds (the Nation, the Hebrew Language and Erets Yisrael). The relationship between God and Israel is the concept of am kodosh to whom God gave the Torah. The relationship between God and the Torah is Erets Yisrael. Like the Magen David, if you remove one triangle or any point, it is no longer a Jewish star.

The Jews of Alexandria tried for a Judaism without the Hebrew language. They did not continue to exist. It is ironic and tragic that at the same time that young Israeli yeshivah students are discussing their Torah in Hebrew, American yeshivot are moving towards more English instruction. Educators who pass off simple ignorance of spoken Hebrew as a sign of frumkeit are not called to task by parents who themselves learned fluency in lashon hakodesh in American yeshivot, and they allow English translations of classical texts—appropriate only for a baal teshuvah without yeshivah education—into the yeshivah sheur. The Rambam’s Commentary on the Mishnah was translated into Hebrew so that it could be the property of every Torah student. The American response is to translate the Mishnah Berurah and Mikraot Gedolot into English. People loyal to the kedushah of Hebrew and sensitive to the implications of the revival of Hebrew as the Jews’ spoken language should insist that Torah study be in Hebrew and that every ben Torah and bat Torah be fluent in our national tongue.

We survived for 2000 years because we had an Yisrael shel maalah in our daily prayers. We had this messianic vision; now it is becoming a reality. We are witnessing the atchalta d’geulah, and we must respond.

We must show our students that only in Israel is there a possibility of observing all the mitsvot. Only in Israel is there a possibility
of discussing halakhah meaningfully each day. Only in Israel may we become a living nation where we can decide about war or ecology in accordance with Torah principles. For centuries we have been developing and refining a system of society. Now we have the opportunity to act on our dreams. Israel challenges us as Torah Jews to take our prayers seriously.

Israel is also the only place where we can defeat anti-Semitism, because anti-Semitism in the diaspora is here to stay. The last 2000 years have proven that there is no solution for eradicating that problem. But the problems facing Israel are not simply those that grow out of anti-Semitism; they also flow from political intricacies and therefore leave some hope for a solution. For us, a major approach in dealing with Israel is to emphasize aliya— but as an ideal, a fulfillment of a prophecy, a place where the whole halakhic lifestyle can be played out, and not simply as a place safe from anti-Semitism. We cannot truly redeem ourselves in the galut and we will never be able to. (On the other hand we should realize that the galut cannot simply be liquidated overnight and as long as it exists we, including those in Israel, have the obligation to support its institutions. The shekhinah may be in galut with us, but we must be on guard against letting the galut become a mikdash.)

It is interesting that lately a new awakening to yiddishkeit revolves around the teaching of the Shoah, focusing on the horrors of the Nazi atrocities against the six million Jews. In many schools and yeshivot teaching about the Holocaust replaces the study of real sources. This approach entails many dangers. There is no question that the teaching of the Holocaust is a necessity, but it should never be cheapened into a gimmick used to awaken interest in Judaism. Judaism is not the result of Amalekism; it commands the remembrance of Amalek. Teaching only the horrors of the Shoah may have negative results on the student. The only way to present Judaism is to start with basic sources and develop concepts from the roots, including the teaching of Israel, which represents the “hevlei geulah,” the messianic idea in action. The effects of international anti-Semitism today, thirty-five years after the Holocaust, may result in disappointment, disillusionment, a loss of hope in the future of the Jewish people. We must be sure that our own educational process does not add to that possibility. (On this issue of teaching about the Shoah, see Yaffa Elich, “The Holocaust as Obligation and Excuse,” Sh’ma, 16 Nov. 1979, pp. 9-181.)

Anti-Semitism has changed drastically since the time of the pogroms. Those were limited to specific parts of a country or land. Now, anti-Semitism has become an international phenomenon and
many may doubt if there is any escape. Our ultimate trust is in God's promises, but in the political arena our only hope lies in the fact that we have a state, a political entity, to protect Jewish interests. We need not be embarrassed as religious people to talk in political terms. The tradition has held that there is no difference between this world and the messianic period other than shibud malkhuyot. Independence, which is a political state, is the key word in the process of redemption towards a world where anti-Semitism does not exist and a Shoah is impossible.

The teaching of Israel must include a serious criticism of the philosophy of secular Zionism, but it must nonetheless include the history of the movement and recognition of its accomplishments. However complex their motives, secular Zionists contributed greatly to the building of the land and fulfilling the mitsvah of yishuv ha-arets. (As Rav Kuk pointed out, only the high priest could enter the Kodesh Kodashim, but until the mikdash was completed, the simplest of workers might stand in that area.) At the same time, we should emphasize the contribution of religious Zionism in building Israel. It was the Torah which invented Zionism, not Herzl; many of the accomplishments of the present state are due to the work of religious Zionists. The background of the world in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries must also be presented, and students should have an understanding of current political realities. All of this can only by establishing the study of Israel as part of the formal curriculum.

The first place for such a course is in the general studies department as part of the ninth grade social studies curriculum. One semester should be sufficient. The curriculum should include Israel's history, its political structure, and its geography. Include also current events and, of course, a discussion of the difference between a religious and secular view of the state. The study of the Middle East is as important a social studies unit as is the history of Asia, and we should be aware of the curriculum possibilities open to us. The facts that we consider important about Israel will not be learned by the average student unless we teach it to him.

The course should be repeated in depth on the senior level when the students have completed their studies in Jewish History up through the Holocaust period. At this point we can expect many discussions to surface with reference to Israel, such as the place of halakhah in a political state, the imperative of aliyah. In addition, one semester should be designated in the Talmud and halakhah class for teaching an anthology of topics like mitsvot hateluyot baarets, the initial and permanent kedushah, Ketubot 111 and the like.
Greater emphasis should be given in the teaching of Tanakh to those topics relating to Erets Yisrael. In addition to the academic courses, the school policy should be to encourage its students to study in Israel for at least a year following the fourth year of high school.

During the four years of high school, care should be taken to initiate programs for Yom Ha'atsmaut and Yom Yerushalayim (presented as religious and not simply nationalistic holidays), lectures from Israeli roshei yeshivot and other visiting personalities. These must be planned out as must any educational program.

Israel is not only a state; it is also a state of mind. Its existence is not simply the fulfillment of a dream; it is the fulfillment of a prophecy. It is not the property of "Zionist"; it is a gift from God to Klal Yisrael. As individuals, we must respond; as educators, we should recognize our responsibility to bring its existence into our formal curriculum. We should not hear our beloved's beckoning—Kol Dodi Dofek—and let it go unanswered.