

Must Jewish History be Meaningful? The Necessity and Impossibility of Religious Zionism
A שיחה by Aryeh Klapper

Some introductory remarks about the content and nature of this talk - The topic I'm addressing tonight is of course far too large to be adequately dealt with in one lecture, and I hope that it will stimulate discussion and introspection rather than generate closure. Also, I speak about this topic at all with some ambivalence - some years ago I told my friend Yaakov Genack that if he would only construct a credible rationale for American Zionism, I would happily take care of the rest of Halakhic Jewry's ideological need, since I felt myself to be suffering from a passion-deficit in some critical areas of Zionism. 'אם לא עכשיו אימתי, אבל במקום שאין איש וכו'.

The genre I'll be striving for tonight is the שיחה, the yeshivah vehicle for deeply passionate yet rigorous ideological argumentation. This is a continuation of my first try at it, so I ask your indulgence.

In 1968, Tradition magazine, the intellectual voice of American Zionist Orthodoxy, published a symposium on Religious Zionism. The questions asked to contributors were the following:

Read all six questions.

I think we would be hard-pressed to find an event in Israeli history since 1967 that could reasonably generate a similar set of questions. With the possible exception of the minimal casualties from Iraqi Scud attacks during the Gulf War - and surely there any alleged Divine intervention was massively overshadowed by that of the United States - post-6 Day War Israeli history has been unremittingly mundane, and occasionally even unsuccessful. At a meeting I attended several years ago between the aging American Mizrahi leadership and young YU rabbinic students, communication was nearly impossible - the old guard kept repeating "1967" in awed tones while we muttered "Lebanon" under our breath.

Today, as we prepare to celebrate the political rebirth of the Jewish nation, events in Lebanon again militate against breathless optimism and enthusiasm. When Jacob heard his brother Esav was approaching in force, the Torah tells us ויירא שמא יהרג, ויצר לו שמא ויירא יעקב מאד ויצר לו - ויירא שמא יהרג, ויצר לו שמא ויירא שמא יהרג. Jacob's fears, of course, do not come true - a nocturnal battle with his brother's angel substitutes for a potentially bloody battle. Hashem has spared *us* neither of Yaakov's fears - we are killed, and we kill others. Can we still find meaning when we must battle Esav and not just his angel, physically and not in dreams? Can we find meaning in a stagnated and perhaps even regressing situation, in a battle for maintenance rather than imminent Moshiach?

To explain why we must, I turn to a different Tradition Symposium - one which asked the same questions, but 25 years later. The tone of the answers in this second version is guarded. But one participant - Dr. David Berger, regarded by many of us as perhaps the ideal YU product - throws a compelling theological challenge in the teeth of our caution.

quote from "Although G-d's" until "be found".

The implications of this position are
quote "Recognition . . . attention"

In other words, Israeli history must be meaningful, and Religious Zionism is necessary.

We'll discuss later the content of the Religious Zionism Dr. Berger views as mandatory. But I'd like first to explore the paradox of my subtitle and explain why religious Zionism is also impossible, and impossible precisely because Jewish History must be meaningful. To illustrate this idea I'll use a powerful passage from Chaim Potok's The Chosen.

The year is 1947. A Chassidic rebbe, Reb Saunders, tells a story about an elderly chasid who journeyed to Israel to spend the last years of his life there. Three days after reaching the Kotel the chasid dies while praying for Moshiach to come. The young Orthodox intellectual, Reuven Malter, comments softly that some people now believed that Israel was a place for Jews to live and not just to die, and Reb Saunders reacts. Quote from "Who are" until "Jewish goyim", then from "The land" until "Master of the Universe"

The essential point - and we will expand on it and deal with specifics later - is that any potential meaning of Jewish History must dignify the lives of participants in that history who lived and died by and for the tradition. The statehood of Modern Israel - prima facie - fails this test, and badly. The state perceives itself as an end, not as a means to world transformation. It was not achieved through greater piety, but through politics and armed struggle. If statehood was an independently significant goal, then our achievement of it by purely natural means for purely secular purposes mocks the efforts of those millions, strung over two thousand years, who struggled all their lives to *earn* Divine political intervention and died believing they had simply not been good enough.

Religious Zionism, then, is impossible. Any meaning it would give Israeli history would be stolen from Jewish History. And yet, Religious Zionism is necessary, or else Jewish History has no meaning to be stolen.

How can we resolve, or at least live coherently with, this paradox?

Possible resolution -

1. Finding non-Messianic, or at least highly adulterated Messianic, meaning in Israeli History. In other words, what the Jews of the past hoped for has not yet come, even in part - we are not even necessarily closer to it than they were - and what they hoped for can only be achieved through piety. Problems- What meaning can purely secular statehood have - and why should we have acquired this meaningful thing undeservedly?

Answers to the second problem include

- a. greater love of Eretz Yisrael
- b. Shoah

Neither of these appeal to me particularly. The first gives, I think, an unwarranted priority to ahavat haaretz - if statehood is indeed a critical initiating condition for Messianism - more significant than the establishment of an effective social welfare system, or communal unity, or communal religious depth - i don't think love of the Land per se should be sufficient to earn it. This seems to me to slight the values involved in loving G-d and Man.

As for the Shoah, I am always queasy about earning things through suffering - if we are owed for our suffering, then our suffering was at least in part undeserved, an unsettling idea. And Religious Zionism existed before 1939, and i don't think anyone suggested at that point that we were religiously obligated to turn down a state at that point unless someone agreed to attempt genocide on us beforehand and met with considerable success.

So Divine intervention must be deserved, and we are undeserving. What has occurred to us must therefore not be Divine intervention. But then our history is and has been meaningless. And if we are wrong, we are monstrously ungrateful.

I'd like to propose, tentatively and with trepidation, a possible path to a solution. Before doing so i acknowledge my debt to the writings and speeches of Rabbi Norman Lamm, Lord Jakobovits, and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, but on this topic I wish to make special mention of the writings of David Hartman.

I think that the feeling of gratitude which lies at the center of Religious Zionism, and which makes Religious Zionism necessary, can be sustained without claiming that Hashem miraculously intervened to create the state, and that we can deny miraculous intervention without stripping either the state or Jewish History in general of meaning.

When G-d exiles the Jews, he places us in a condition known as hester panim, hiding of the face. He makes us subject to a lesser degree of Providence. Perhaps we deserved worse - perhaps He should have watched over us and made sure we never gained sovereignty again, or at least until we fully repented. But He chose not to, and this is cause for gratitude.

Furthermore, that we live in a time of hester panim does not prevent us from correctly feeling that we owe G-d gratitude for all the good things that happen to us, and our gratitude is greater for jackpot lottery tickets than for found dimes..

And statehood is not merely a national jackpot lottery ticket - it is qualitatively different. The greatest gift Hashem ever gave us was the Torah, and more than anything else, statehood enables us to truly experience, and hopefully fulfill, the responsibilities of the Torah. For me, the attraction of aliyah has never been the sanctity of the Land but rather the realization that halakhah can only be real when it relates to a society and not merely to individuals, when it must make possible police and industry and social order.

If we live up to these responsibilities, and bring the Messiah, he will have less to do when he comes - but in this view the state is in no sense Messianic. It merely affords a perhaps greater chance for our community to become Messianic.

And In this view we can judge the state not by its virtue relative to the past, or to the ideal, but as it stands. Here I recollect Rav Lichtenstein\ normally an outwardly controlled person, shouting in the midst of his sichah the shabbat after Operation Solomon, the Ethiopian airlift -
כל מי שאינו מכיר בזכות המדינה היום הרי הוא אטום ועור

We can celebrate the mere fact that we have more opportunity to exercise our responsibilities than we have had for several thousand years. And we can celebrate the extent to which we have lived up to them, even as we acknowledge that we have not yet merited the end of hester panim.