

# The Religious Zionism of Rav Soloveitchik: A Synthesis of Worlds

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This article attempts to give a full and fair account of Rav Soloveitchik's relationship with Religious Zionism, the long journey he travelled to develop this relationship, and the synthesis of worlds that he achieved.

There are two key issues to consider; the first is why the Rav was so firmly anti-Zionist when he arrived in America. To understand this, we must discuss the Rav's historical and sociological background; his childhood in Europe and early years in America. We must also examine the trends of secularism, nationalism and communism in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, along with the responses of the Yeshiva world.

The second issue is how the impact of the Holocaust and birth of the State of Israel caused the Rav to fundamentally change his perspective. We will examine the philosophy of activism and Religious Zionism that he developed, and consider the nature of the Rav's Zionism and how his independent thought, creative intellect and family heritage gave rise to a Zionism different to that of other 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers.

## The Rav's Agudah Philosophy

Attitude formation is a complex process. Attitudes develop based on a complex interplay between environmental factors, familial influences, personal experiences and intellectual arguments. This section will highlight several factors that were key to the formulation of the Rav's initial Agudist philosophy. We will highlight: his family influence, the struggles faced by his father teaching in a Mizrachi school, his exposure to the world of Agudah in Berlin, and the role models he found when beginning life in America.

## Rav Chaim of Brisk

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, deep rifts spread across the Jewish world. The secularism of enlightenment philosophy clashed with the Torah values of Orthodoxy. The political trend of

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nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also deeply impacted the Jewish world. If the Italians, Germans and Hungarians could have their own autonomous states, then perhaps this could also be a realizable dream for the Jewish people. The desire to return to Jerusalem and renew the link with *Eretz Yisrael* is embedded in religious thought and prayer, and nationalism provided a secular language in which to express this religious ideology. The continued presence of persecution and anti-Semitism acted to crystallize Jewish nationalism, and it was following the tragic accusation of Dreyfus for treason against France that Theodore Herzl first gave form to the dream of a Jewish State in Israel.

Zionism caused a huge upheaval in the Yeshiva world. Herzl appealed to many Jews, but the religious world recoiled from the practical secularism that he preached. The yeshiva world of Eastern Europe was partially isolated from the powerful influence of the Enlightenment, yet ideas still travelled from Western Europe and could have strong impacts. The most famous yeshiva of those times was Volozhin, and this drama was played out in their *beit midrash* even before Herzl began his campaign.

The most famous rosh yeshiva of Volozhin was the Netziv, Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin; he was well versed in Enlightenment literature and was a passionate supporter of the nascent Zionist vision. His son, Rabbi Meir Berlin (who later changed his last name to Bar-Ilan), became the president of World Mizrahi, which the Religious Zionist Organization founded in 1902, and his closest student was Rav Kook.

The co-rosh yeshiva of Volozhin was Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, and, though he left Volozhin to become the rabbi of Slutsk, his son, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik, stayed in Volozhin and soon rose to the fore. He became a dominant personality in the yeshiva, with many followers. Rav Chaim was vehemently opposed to Zionism, which he viewed as godless secular nationalism, which would only result in taking Jews away from Judaism. However, he deeply loved and cared about the holiness of the Land of Israel, delivering high level *shiurim* on *Kodashim* and *Taharat* (two complex areas of the Talmud that are mostly applicable in Temple times). This duality was a key component of the Rav's heritage.

## Rav Moshe Soloveitchik in Warsaw

The Rav's father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, began his main rabbinic career as the community rabbi of the town of Kislavichi, where the Jewish population was mostly Lubavitch and religious. The Russian revolution changed Jewish life irreparably. Communism rampaged throughout Russia and religious life was decimated. Communism engendered a deep hatred of tradition and religion, and many youth were swept up in the tide as it engulfed the country. The Rav's family managed to escape from communist Russia and arrived in Warsaw. Warsaw was a center of Ger Chassidism and the Chassidic towns in Russia were centers of the newly founded Agudah movement. Agudah was founded in 1912 with the intention of creating an over-arching organization to unite Torah Jews in the face of secularizing influences. However, the conservative element rapidly gained dominance within the organization and Agudah came to be defined in opposition to Mizrahi and its support for Zionism. Agudah stood for the values of traditional European Torah Jewry and it was within this environment of ideological conflict that the Rav grew up.

Rav Moshe began teaching in a Mizrahi school, an enlightened institution in which secular studies were encouraged alongside Jewish studies. The Rav saw how his father was mocked and rejected by his family due to his association with a Mizrahi institution. Furthermore, the Rav saw his father suffering within the school, as his conservative views differed from the more radical and modern approach of certain members of the faculty. The intense sensation of pain a child feels when he sees his father unhappy runs deep, and the Rav's childhood experiences of watching his father suffer firmly established a negative association with Mizrahi organizations.

## Life in Berlin

In 1926, the Rav travelled to Berlin, the center of the German Jewish world. The Judaism and rabbinic life in Berlin was a world away from that which he had been exposed to in either Russia or Poland. He was exposed to the world of Torah and *Derech Eretz*, the legacy of Rav Hirsch. He attended *shiurim* of the *Sridei Aish*, went to visit Hildesheimer, and encountered a *beit midrash* full of rabbinic students with a mature secular education. This was not the Agudah that the Rav was exposed to in Russia, this was Agudah with PhDs; sophisticated, educated and worldly. The Rav was overawed by this experience. During the six years he spent in Berlin, he mixed with the greatest Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was in the thrall of the great leaders of the Agudah movement. The Rav aspired to follow this path, to become one of these great Agudah leaders, entrenched in the world of Torah and of tradition, yet also well versed in secular philosophy, science and politics.

## Agudah in America

The third factor that influenced the formulation of the Rav's Agudist position was the role models he encountered in America. In 1932, the Rav came to the United States, brought in by the Chicago Hebrew Theological College. When the Depression hit the American economy, the community was unable to honor the contract, and so the Rav moved to Boston. Religious life in Boston was a challenge and the person that Rav Soloveitchik respected most was Rabbi Eliezer Silver. Rabbi Silver was the first American-made *talmid chacham*, a student of Rav Chaim Ozer who had come to America and worked in the insurance business before serving as a community rabbi in Harrisburg. In 1937, Rabbi Silver led the American delegation to the last European Agudah conference, and received a mandate to establish Agudah in the United States. Rav Soloveitchik was one of the founding members. In the late 1930s, when the rabbinic leaders of Agudah refused to support a boycott of Germany and of Hitler, the Rav sided with them. This decision seems perverse in hindsight, but we must recall that Agudah of the 1930s was still stuck in the mind-set of the ghetto. They maintained an inherent aversion to confronting government authority and they felt that a boycott would only anger Hitler and make the situation worse for European Jews.

The highlight of the Rav's Agudist career was the eulogy he gave in 1940 for Rav Chaim Ozer. This was the clearest, most expressive and eloquent expression of Agudah philosophy ever given on American soil. The Rav described two of the unique garments of the *kohen gadol* (high priest): the *tzitz* (head-plate) and the *choshen* (breast-plate). The *tzitz* represents the mind committed to halachic issues for which the *kohen gadol* is the ultimate authority, and the *choshen* represents worldly issues, the political, the military and the questions of practical reality for which the *kohen gadol* must also be the ultimate arbiter. There can be no separation between the

bearer of the *tzitz* and the *choshen*; rabbinic control must be absolute in both realms. The Rav fully condoned the actions of the Agudah in not boycotting Hitler, and echoed Rav Chaim Ozer's disapproval of Zionism and the secularizing influences with which it was inextricably linked. For the Rav, secular Zionism's attempt to sever itself from the domain of halachah and from the purview of rabbinic authority could not be tolerated.

## Antithesis and Synthesis

We now deal with the issue of how the Rav justified the switch from being a committed Agudist to being a powerful and eloquent advocate for Religious Zionism. The Rav himself described this process in terms of a dialectic comprised of three stages: his thesis was Agudah, the primacy of the insulated Torah community and adherence to doctrine as defined by the rabbinic leadership; the antithesis was the pain, disaster and destruction of the Holocaust; and his synthesis was an activist Religious Zionism. In this section we explain the latter two stages of this journey and distinguish between two fundamental components of his great synthesis; first, the necessity for constant, dynamic reevaluation of *hashkafic* (worldview) decisions, and second, the religious mandate of activism and creativity. The Rav dealt extensively with the question of the rationale behind his change of heart, and we draw from his own allegory and exegesis to support and explain this process.

## Rejection and Destruction

The initial catalyst for the Rav's change of heart came in 1943, when the horrific nature of the destruction being wreaked among European Jewry became evident. American Jewry woke up to Hitler's crimes and many members of the Agudah leadership, who had rejected a boycott in the 1930s, announced that the time had come to take action. Two days before Yom Kippur, Agudah leaders, the Rav among them, marched to Congress to request a meeting with the president. The greatest rabbinic delegation that America could muster was denied an audience. Their protest went unanswered and they returned home, defeated and dejected. When the full extent of the destruction of European Jewry became apparent, the knowledge that six million Jews had been murdered and countless communities obliterated caused deep and lasting mental anguish. Furthermore, it caused the Rav to make a frank and full reevaluation of his philosophy. The Rav came to the decision that he had been wrong; he had been wrong about the primacy of rabbinic edict in the realm of *hashkafah*, and he had been wrong about the relevance of Jewish activism.

## Religious Innovation—Yosef and the Brothers

In his addresses to the American Mizrahi Association, which were subsequently transcribed as the *Chamesh Derashot*, the Rav explained the first aspect of this change of heart. The Rav noted that in the realm of halachah, the rabbinic majority reigns supreme. G-d gave the Torah to man and our capacity for halachic creativity and decision-making is axiomatic to a live and vibrant relationship to G-d. In *hashkafah* however, the rules are different. For questions that are outside the four volumes of the *Shulchan Aruch*, the focus is not on man's insight and deduction, rather we have to be constantly evaluating what it is that G-d wants of man. We have to continually reevaluate our decisions to ensure they align with *ratzon Hashem* (the will of G-d), and we have to adapt to the world around us. In *hashkafah*, there is no edict that is infallible and no rebbe

who is exempt from this obligation for constant reappraisal and review. Once halachah is fixed by man it becomes law that even G-d cannot alter, the heavenly voice affirms *lo bashamayim hi*—it is not in heaven. *Hashkafah*, however, must be in a constant state of flux and adaptation.

The Rav connected this message to the conflict between Yosef and his brothers. All the children of Ya'akov knew that there would be an exile, as had been told to Avraham. Yosef wanted to question the comfortable life of the family and challenge them to rethink the status quo of life in Canaan in preparation for the inevitable trials ahead. The brothers rejected this. They judged Yosef guilty of treason for even suggesting it; they were happy with life in Canaan, comfortable, settled and secure. The divine voice rang out that Yosef was right. Yosef's visions proved true and he eventually ended up as viceroy over all of Egypt, able to guide them safely to Egypt and soften the blow of exile. The Rav explained that the Mizrachi of 1902 represented Yosef Hatzadik and Agudah represented the other brothers. Mizrachi wanted to reevaluate Jewish life in Europe, to prepare for the Jewish future and ensure Jewish continuity, whereas Agudah were content with the status quo. Mizrachi fought and dreamed, and without them there would have been no place for refugees to go to following the war. Without the *yishuv*, Hitler would have killed Judaism. The Rav saw this as a full retroactive justification of Mizrachi philosophy.

## Activism—Ya'akov and Eisav

The second component of the Rav's Religious Zionism was activism, the necessity for Jews to take a stand in world affairs, to be people of deeds as well as of books. He developed this philosophy building within the tradition of his father and grandfather. The essence of the Brisk conception of Torah is the mandate of *imitatio Dei*, intellectual creativity of man emulating the creativity of G-d through the study of Torah. The Rav felt that this creative power must also be actualized beyond the realm of the intellect and carried into the outside world. To substantiate this message, the Rav drew from the episode in which Rivkah engineers a deception of Yitzchak to give the *brachot* (blessings) to Yaakov. He described Yitzchak as the epitome of holiness and sanctity, the *korban shelamim* who never left the Land of Israel. According to Yitzchak's worldview, the best possible path for Ya'akov was to be as an "*ish yoshev ohalim*" (a man who dwelled in tents), insulated from the outside world, shielded from mundane physical, economic and political realities and able to focus solely on the study of Torah. According to Yitzchak's vision, if Ya'akov was ever in need of assistance in practical matters, he could turn to his brother Eisav, the worldly industrialist. That was the view of Yitzchak. Rivkah, however, thought differently; she told Ya'akov to go out into the field, to fight for the blessings of heaven and earth and to gain a foothold in the outside world. She realized that this was the only viable way in which the tent of Torah could survive. The Rav believed that the vision of Mizrachi was to extend beyond the tent of Torah, to establish the ownership of the Jewish people of the Land of Israel in the way that the returning exiles did in the times of Ezra, through weeding and plowing, digging wells and fortifying borders. The Rav came to believe with a full heart that the true achievement of the State of Israel was the creation of a people with a Gemarah in one hand and a plowshare in the other. This activism was at the heart of his Zionism and at the focus of his entire worldview.

## The knock of opportunity—*Kol Dodi Dofek*

Activism comes with obligation. If G-d gave us the power to act, we have a responsibility to do so. The Rav elucidated this beautifully in his 1956 speech at Yeshiva University entitled "*Kol Dodi Dofek*." He told Shir Hashirim's tragic story of a couple deeply in love. One night the young lover knocks on his beloved's door, but she is too tired and tells him sleepily to go away and come back tomorrow. She awakens the next day and goes to look for him; she searches but eventually realizes that he is gone forever, lost to her for all time because she missed her opportunity. The Rav argued that each of us is given a chance to reach for something, to become great and to actualize our potential. We learn from Shir HaShirim that we must not let our apathy, feelings of inadequacy or laziness spoil this opportunity. The Rav spoke of six knocks on the collective door of the Jewish people, six awakenings to call us to awaken and reach for greatness. These six knocks were the six miraculous events accompanying the establishment of the State of Israel:

- The first knock was political; the alliance of the United States and USSR to vote for the existence of the Jewish State.
- The second was military; the victory of the tiny Jewish forces, handicapped by an arms embargo and massively outnumbered.
- The third was theological; the refutation of Christian doctrine by demonstrating that the Jewish people will again be a vibrant player on the world stage.
- The fourth was sociological; the fact that Jews from around the world felt proud to be Jewish and free to re-engage with their Jewish identity.
- The fifth was an international change of attitude due to the birth of the State of Israel; the fact that Jews had a position of power and a homeland meant that Jewish blood could no longer be spilt freely and without fear of retribution.
- The sixth and final knock was the influx of exiles; the return to Israel of Jews from across the world.

This speech became the most famous exposition of Religious Zionist thought given in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the philosophy it contained was a result of the Rav's personal journey over the previous decades.

## Brisker Zionism

The Religious Zionist thought developed by Rav Soloveitchik was significantly different to that of other 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers. For both Rav Soloveitchik and Rav Kook, Zionism was connected to Torah. For Rav Kook, however, Zionism was an *a priori* reflection of his Torah perspective, as obvious as *tefillah*, Shabbat or *kashrut*. For the Rav, Zionism was a *posteriori*, a position adopted after tumult and struggle. The Rav, therefore, did not grant Zionism an independent mandate in religious life. He rejected the position of Nachmanides, elucidated in his commentary on *Acharei Mot* (18:25), that mitzvot can only be properly fulfilled in Israel and that, therefore, *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* (settling the Land of Israel) is more important than all the other commandments combined. This position would lead to the conclusion that Zionism is more important than every other aspect of Torah life. The Rav whole-heartedly rejected this; he believed that Zionism, as with every other *hashkafah*, must be actualized solely within the bounds of a rigid

halachic framework. This position often put the Rav at odds with other Mizrahi thinkers who followed the teachings of Rav Kook and saw Zionism as of supreme importance within religious life.

The Rav often quoted the Mishnah in *Yoma* 8:5, which states that if a person is ill on Yom Kippur, then we ask a doctor whether they must eat; the rabbi has no say in the matter. The Rav felt adamant that *yishuv Eretz Yisrael* is similar to Yom Kippur. Just as Yom Kippur is disregarded to save a life, so too is *yishuv Eretz Yisrael*. Thus, when the question of land for peace arose in the 1970s, he felt that the military and political experts ought to determine the best course of action.

## Conclusion

Rav Soloveitchik was arguably the greatest exponent of Religious Zionism in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and he travelled a long path to reach this position. By the 1930s, the Rav had become a fervent Agudist. This position stemmed from his family background and formative experiences in Europe and America. It took the war and subsequent establishment of the State of Israel to force the Rav to reevaluate his approach and come to the belief that the Agudah worldview was no longer tenable. He constructed a majestic Religious Zionism built on activism and the passionate desire to seek out G-d's guiding hand in the world. He became an ardent Zionist and a member of Mizrahi yet always maintained his independent view. Each decision he made was subjected to rigorous analysis and halachah was never subjugated in favor of Zionist sentiment.

His switch from Agudah to Mizrahi was a testament to his intellectual honesty and personal conviction. It was hard for the Rav to differ from his family, change his associations and uproot his worldview, yet he came to see this as a fulfillment of two fundamental religious obligations; the drive to attune with the will of G-d and the mandate to emulate G-d's creativity, to be an activist and make an impact in the wider world. Both the content and context of his Zionist philosophy have beautiful and powerful messages for us all.