

RAV MOSHE AVIGDOR AMIEL: RESTORING THE CROWN

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In 1933 Rabbi Moshe Avigdor Amiel, a prominent student of Rabbis Chaim Ozer Grodzinski and Shimon Shkop who later went on to become Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, delivered an address to the world Mizrahi convention in Crackow. In his remarks, he outlined what he viewed as the defining characteristic of the Mizrahi worldview which distinguished it from other Orthodox groups. From its inception, Mizrahi had been involved with elements of Jewish life that had not traditionally been part of Orthodox activities. Chief among these was broad political involvement with the rebuilding of Jewish settlement in Israel and mass education toward this end. These activities had drawn criticism from other groups, which claimed that involvement in these areas ran contrary to the traditions received from earlier generations that did not include such things. In response to these claims, Rabbi Amiel distinguished between two forms of perpetuating traditions: “*hachzakah benoshnot*,” maintaining ancient customs, and “*hachzarat ha’atarah leyoshnah*,” the restoration of the crown. The former practice entails an exact replication of the practices of previous generations without consideration for contextual concerns. The latter “means to seek

out the primal source, the reason of all reasons and cause of all causes of a chain of words and actions.” In other words, to uncover the core values and directives of Judaism that are encoded in the tradition we receive, and to base our practice on that framework. This second approach, argues Rabbi Amiel, is central to the Mizrahi worldview.

A benefit of this approach is that it allows for combating the deleterious effects of outside influences, which may have crept into daily Jewish life without detection. “We must admit,” says Rabbi Amiel, “even Torah Judaism has been influenced by the galut (exile).” As a result, we must consider carefully the fundamentals of our religion and reconstruct those elements that have been worn away by a grueling exile.

To this end, Rabbi Amiel suggests that we can divide the mitzvot into three categories. There are those between man and G-d, and those between man and man. These are readily recognized. But there are also “mitzvot that are incumbent upon us to fulfill for the sake of maintaining the Jewish nation.” These include “*milhemet mitzvah* (biblically mandated war), appointing a king and a Sanhedrin, [and] settling the Land of Israel.” Over the course of time, outside influences have diminished our sensitivity to the



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need to actively engage in this third category of mitzvot where possible. The Mizrahi worldview, argues Rabbi Amiel, seeks to reintegrate these three categories. The result is not a disregard for our *mesorah*, but an attempt to live that *mesorah* in the fullest possible way. “It does not innovate anything but rather restores the crown.”

Rabbi Amiel’s notion of “restoring the crown” fits neatly into the greater nexus of religious Zionist thought. An emphasis on national mitzvot leads naturally to a more open and involved relationship with the greater Jewish people. The goal of reviving parts of the mesorah that have been de-emphasized and degraded by galut is in line with the general religious Zionist idea of taking a proactive role in the ultimate redemption.