

RAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN: ZIONISM AND KNESSET YISRAEL

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Speaking for myself, I am far from totally identifying with the official Zionist ideology. I have the privilege of being regarded in America as a bit odd for being a Zionist, and in Eretz Yisrael as being a little odd (at least within our world) for being suspect as not sufficiently Zionist.

By His Light, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein

The view of Mori VeRabi, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l on Zionism was complex, nuanced and rich. As in every other aspect of life, he aspired to see things “steadily and whole,” in the words of Matthew Arnold. His Zionism was based on solid halakhic foundations, inspired by a firm belief in human responsibility and sensitive to the sacral, metaphysical and historical uniqueness of the Holy Land. In the following lines, I would like to briefly introduce one of the key elements that stood as the basis of Rav Lichtenstein’s Zionist thought — Knesset Yisrael, its role and the duty it entails.

In a few of his “technical” halakhic essays, Rav Lichtenstein developed a common theme; namely, that certain mitzvot, when performed in Eretz Yisrael, carry a special dimension that is lacking outside of the Land; other mitzvot are rendered completely inaccessible when not performed in the land.

Rav Lichtenstein proposed that underlying these halakhot was an assertion about “the collective standing of the Jewish population in Eretz Yisrael, about which the Gemara writes, “These are the ones referred to as “kahal”” (*Horiyot* 3). In this light,

he discussed “the nature and root of the precedence afforded to the poor of Eretz Yisrael, and the relationship between the mitzva of tzedaka itself to Eretz Yisrael.” (“Tzedaka in Eretz Yisrael and in Chutz La-Aretz” available at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/tzedaka-eretz-yisrael-and-chutz-la-aretz>); the obligation to appoint kings and ordained Rabbis in Eretz Yisrael alone (“Semicha in Eretz Yisrael and in Chutz La-Aretz”); the connection between Eretz Yisrael and the sanctification of months and years (*Kedushat Aviv*, p. 221); and the restriction of the eglah arufah (*broken-necked calf*) to the land’s boundaries (*ibid*, p. 270).

Rav Lichtenstein explained that all these mitzvot not only relate to the individual Jew but are part of our national commitment to build a just society. Only in Eretz Yisrael does Knesset Yisrael appear as one unified body and not as a mere collection of individuals. Therefore, these mitzvot are greatly enhanced, and some are only possible, in Eretz Yisrael.

This strong sense of common national existence was not limited to theoretical analysis. Rather, Rav Lichtenstein put it at the forefront of his seminal paper — “*Zot Torat HaHesder*” (The ideology of Hesder). There he developed what was then a novel idea — that Israeli yeshiva students must integrate army service in the IDF into their yeshiva years not because the secular law requires them to do so, but because of their most deep moral and halakhic commitment. Rav Lichtenstein goes out of his way to explain that he does not see the military force per se as



Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt”l
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something to be idealized and desired; nay, he sees it as “alien to the ideal Jewish nation ... a political reality imposed upon us by our enemies.” The rationale of the drafting of yeshiva students, then, rests upon “the fact that military service is often the fullest manifestation of a far broader value: gemilut hasadim, the empathetic concern for others and action on their behalf.” Here again, Rav Lichtenstein’s Zionist approach is “impelled by both commitment to Torah and compassion for our people.”

The choice of a person who, while residing in the United States grappled, together with his wife, with the option of aliyah ... who never looked back in regret or reconsideration, possibly signifies the bonding power of derishat Zion ... it is part of what links us, vertically and horizontally, with Knesset Yisrael.

Varieties of Jewish Experience, Rav Lichtenstein